

Teachings on the Prayer of the Heart in the Greek and Syrian Fathers

by

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ABBREVIATIONS

Primary Sources

LG *Book of Steps (Liber Graduum)*

Works by Aphrahat

Dem *Demonstrations*

Works by Ephrem the Syrian

Church *Hymns on the Church*

Epiphany *Hymns on the Epiphany*

Faith *Hymns on Faith*

Heresies *Hymns against Heresies*

Nativity *Hymns on the Nativity*

Paradise *Hymns on Paradise*

Virginity *Hymns on Virginity*

Works by Martyrius

BP *Book of Perfection II*

Works by Isaac of Nineveh

Disc *Discourses (part II)*

Hom *Ascetical Homilies*

Works by Macarius

EM *Great Letter (Epistola Magna)*

Hom *Spiritual Homilies*

Works by Origen of Alexandria

CCels *Against Celsus (Contra Celsum)*

ComCt *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles*

ComMt *Commentary on Matthew*

Fragm1Cor *Fragments on 1 Corinthians*

HomCt *Homilies on the Canticle of Canticles*

HomLc *Homilies on Luke*

HomLev *Homilies on Leviticus*

HomNum *Homilies on Numbers*

PAch *On First Principles (Peri archon)*

PEuch *On Prayer (Peri Euches)*

Works by Evagrius of Pontus

Disc *On Discrimination*

EM *Great Letter (Epistola Magna)*

Ep *Letters (Epistulae)*

Eul *To Eulogios*

GC *Gnostic Chapters*

<i>Monachos</i>	<i>To the Monks (Ad Monachos)</i>
<i>Prak</i>	<i>Praktikos</i>
<i>Prayer</i>	<i>On Prayer</i>
<i>Schol Prov</i>	<i>Scholia on Proverbs</i>
<i>Thoughts</i>	<i>On Thoughts</i>

Works by Dionysius the Areopagite

<i>CH</i>	<i>Celestial Hierarchy</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>Divine Names</i>
<i>EH</i>	<i>Ecclesiastical Hierarchy</i>
<i>Ep</i>	<i>Letters (Epistulae)</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Mystical Theology</i>

Works by Maximus the Confessor

<i>Amb</i>	<i>Ambigua</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>Centuries on Love</i>
<i>CT</i>	<i>Centuries on Theology and the Incarnate Dispensation of the Son of God</i>
<i>Ep</i>	<i>Letters (Epistulae)</i>
<i>Myst</i>	<i>Mystagogy (Mystagogia)</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Various Texts on Theology, the Divine Economy, and Virtue and Vice</i>

Works by Symeon the New Theologian

<i>Disc</i>	<i>Discourses</i>
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Hymns

Hymns of Divine Love

PT

One Hundred and Fifty-Three Practical and Theological

Texts

Works by Gregory of Sinai

CD

On Commandments and Doctrines

Watchfulness

The Beginning of Watchfulness

Works by Gregory Palamas

Tr

Triads

John Climacus

Ladder

The Ladder of Divine Ascent

Hesychius of Sinai

Watchfulness

On Watchfulness and Holiness

Dorotheus of Gaza

Disc

Discourses and Sayings

General and Secondary Sources

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
<i>EEC</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of the Early Church</i>
FOTC	Fathers of the Church
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>OCP</i>	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
<i>RAC</i>	<i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i>
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
VCSS	Variorum Collected Studies Series
<i>VG</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In recent years, considerable attention has been given to the fact that an increasing number of Christians have become disenchanted with their churches and with the little interest these appear to show in the spiritual lives of their parishioners.¹ It has also been suggested that this development has led many such Christians to satisfy their longing for inner growth and transformation by turning to New Age religions, alternative spiritualities, and Eastern faith traditions. Buddhism and Hinduism, two Eastern religions renowned for their contemplative outlook, have been particularly attractive to Westerners seeking to nurture their spiritual existence and to attain greater intimacy with God.²

While the richness of Eastern religions is beyond dispute, it is interesting and perhaps ironic that many contemporary Christians remain unaware of the spiritual wealth

¹ See, for instance, Robin Amis, *A Different Christianity: Early Christian Esotericism and Modern Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. xiii-ix; Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City, 1993), p. 7; Richard Smoley, *Inner Christianity* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2002), pp. 1-2.

² Reference to this phenomenon can be found in a multitude of writings. It is at the heart of works such as L. Angel, *Enlightenment East and West* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994); J. J. Clarke, *Jung and Eastern Thought: A Dialogue with the Orient* (London: Routledge, 1994); idem, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997); E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1992); K. Wilber, J. Engler, and D. P. Brown, eds., *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives and Developments* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986). The phenomenon is considered within a specifically monastic context in Bruno Barnhart and Joseph Wong, eds., *Purity of Heart and Contemplation: A Monastic Dialogue between Christian and Asian Traditions* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Mayeul de Dreuille, *From East to West: A History of Monasticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1999); Donald W. Mitchell and James A. Wiseman, eds., *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* (New York: Continuum, 1997); Brian J. Pierce, *We Walk the Path Together* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005); Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations Across Traditions* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

that characterizes their own heritage and deem Christian teaching too dryly rationalistic to facilitate inner growth. This perception is surprising, especially in view of the fact that Christianity has its own set of powerful meditational approaches to peace and wisdom, approaches that are comparable to those of Asian faith traditions. The mystical writings of early Christian ascetics, in particular, pay close attention to a person's inner development, and a glance at these writings soon reveals that Christianity has always possessed and continues to possess a deep-seated tradition that is profoundly mystical and rich in practical guidance designed to invite communion with God. The present study wishes to explore this early Christian heritage and to shed light on its mystical dimension. It seeks to show that Christianity's ancient legacy, if reintroduced to the teaching of today's churches, may breathe new life into the bodies and souls of dissatisfied Christians and revive interest in their own tradition.

Before we can embark on the exploration of the early Christian mystical tradition, however, a number of matters call for preliminary discussion. The most pressing of these is the explication of the rather elusive term 'mystical.' How might this term and the term 'mysticism' be defined, and in what way are they being used in the present context? What did early Christians mean when they spoke of 'mystical theology'? What defined the 'mystical' life? After giving thought to these opening questions, we will explore some of the reasons for the long-standing neglect of this ancient tradition.

The attempt to define 'mysticism' is a trying one, and some researchers prefer to avoid the term altogether.³ Bernard McGinn, the prominent scholar of Western Christian

³ Denys Turner, "Mysticism," pp. 460-461, in *OCCT*, p. 460; James Davila, "Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism: A Collage of Working Definitions," working paper of the early Jewish and Christian mysticism

mysticism, declares that the complexity of the term and the controversy revolving around its usage makes any attempt at finding a simple definition utopian.⁴ The awareness that mystics of the past would not have thought of themselves as practicing mysticism but rather as practicing the Christian way of life plus the observation that the term is an academic invention which was introduced only in the seventeenth century do little to raise hopes of arriving at a satisfactory definition.⁵

This being said, McGinn does provide a working definition of mysticism by suggesting that it denotes that part of Christian “belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God.”⁶ This is a helpful elucidation of the term, especially within an early Christian context, for it reflects the ancient understanding that mysticism is inherently experiential and linked to a process or way of life. If we take this working definition as a starting point and deepen our inquiry by considering the Greek usage of the term, we may be able to gain some insight into the early Christian understanding of mystical theology and of the mystical life.

At the heart of the words ‘mystical,’ ‘mystic,’ and ‘mysticism’ lies the Greek root *mu*, which means ‘to mutter’ or ‘a muttering sound,’⁷ a meaning that suggests something spoken quietly so as to keep it hidden or secret. This reading is confirmed by the

group, Society of Biblical Language convention, 2001, http://www.iwu.edu/~religion/ejcm/EJCM_Definition.PDF, p. 3; Alexander Golitzin, “Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism: A Collage of Working Definitions,” p. 7.

⁴ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, vol. 1 of *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), p. xv.

⁵ Davila, “Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism: A Collage of Working Definitions,” p. 3; McGinn (1999), p. xvi; Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 11.

⁶ McGinn (1999), p. xvii.

⁷ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 1156.

translation of the closely related word *mustikos* in terms of something 'connected with mysteries,' 'private,' and 'secret.'⁸ *Musterion*, in turn, may be rendered as 'secret,' 'secret rite,' 'secret theology,' or 'mystery,' meanings that are closely associated with the mystery cults of the Greco-Roman world.⁹ The latter word can also be read in terms of God's private counsels or secret thoughts which are hidden from human reason and await their fulfillment or revelation to those for whom they are intended. Paul, who uses *musterion* in 21 places, applies the term to a secret or mystery too profound for human ingenuity. The apostle employs the term specifically to denote the mystery of God's love for humankind as it is revealed in Christ. It describes a secret or mystery not because it is kept secret (on the contrary, it is proclaimed and made known in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ), but because it hinges on the revelation of something that remains, at heart, hidden and inaccessible to human comprehension.¹⁰ In this biblically founded theology, *musterion* describes that which is transcendent and which partakes of the ineffability of Divinity.

When we talk of the mystical theology of the early Christian period, we are thus concerned with a theology that describes an experience which transcends human understanding and points to the ineffable, apophatic nature of Divinity. Simultaneously, we are concerned with a theology that heralds God's self-manifestation in history and a person's ability to acquire knowledge of God as revealed in Christ by belonging to the 'fellowship of the mystery,'¹¹ the church. The latter feature, that is, the idea that humans cannot experience the mystery of God's love apart from the church, is important to bear

⁸ Liddell (1996), p. 1156.

⁹ William Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, rev. & ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 661-662.

¹⁰ Andrew Louth, *Deny the Areopagite* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), p. 28.

¹¹ It is helpful to note that, in the early church, mystery meant sacrament, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist.

in mind, for, as we will see time and again throughout this study, Christianity's mystical heritage is inseparably linked to its ecclesial doctrine. The direct apprehension of God beyond the boundaries of human language and understanding cannot be conceived of apart from the life of the church.¹² If we cast a glance at the originator of the term 'mystical theology,'¹³ the sixth century church father Dionysius the Areopagite, and consider his interpretation of Moses's ascent of Mount Sinai (Ex 19 & 20), we witness his commitment to both of these features:

Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he [Moses] pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. . . . And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. . . . But then he [Moses] breaks . . . away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything.¹⁴

Dionysius's above words confirm the idea that for him, as for many early Christian theologians, God remains, at heart, hidden and inaccessible. His mystical theology is concerned with an experience too profound to be grasped by the human mind, an experience Dionysius tries to capture by resorting to the image of the "mysterious darkness of unknowing." As Moses stands apart from the crowds and ascends Mount Sinai, he passes beyond what can be known and expressed. Wrapped in the intangible and invisible, he can express the ineffable nature of Divinity only by relating what it is not.

As to the second point that is here being raised, that is, the idea that mystical and ecclesial theology go hand in hand, it is helpful to note that while Dionysius's reference to Moses who is "standing apart from the crowds" seems to give the impression that he

¹² Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 46.

¹³ Alexander Golitzin, "Dionysius Areopagita: A Christian Mysticism?" *Pro Ecclesia* 12.2 (Spring 2003): p. 181.

¹⁴ Dionysius, *MT 3*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), p. 137.

encourages members of his audience to withdraw into isolation and to sever relations with the community of the church, the theologian does not endorse such an approach. Dionysius's comment on chosen priests who accompany Moses on his ascent of the mountain and his frequent use of liturgical echoes throughout *The Mystical Theology* suggest that this early Christian, like so many fellow-theologians, was deeply committed to the church and its liturgy. Rather than advocate separation from the Christian community and a life of isolation, Dionysius seems to have encouraged a life of interiority and introspection which, rooted in the church, is inherently relational. This notion is supported by the high likelihood that Dionysius was a bishop and mindful of the closely bonded liturgical community of the devout.¹⁵

We will have the opportunity to consider Dionysius's views on the mystical life more fully in the chapter devoted to the discussion of his work. At this point, it suffices to note that Dionysius looked to the mystical life as an existence based on the mystery of Christ, an existence which, while deeply introspective, never implies a disengaged state of being. Although the perception of God's presence introduces Christians to extraordinary inner experiences, the subjective experience of Divinity per se is not the goal of the Christian life.¹⁶ The most prominent feature of mystical existence is its inherently communal nature and a person's dependence on the church and its liturgy for the inner perception of God. Dionysius and his fellow-theologians all believed that humans who follow Moses's example and commit to a life of purification and contemplation, who quiet their minds by engaging in the practice of inner prayer, and who do so in the hope of gaining greater self-knowledge and of deepening, rather than

¹⁵ Louth (1989), p. 1.

¹⁶ McIntosh (1998), p. 6.

severing neighborly relations, exemplify the Christian teaching on the mystical life. The 'mystic' of the ancient church was a person who searched for God by participating ever more fully in the fellowship of the mystery. For early Christian theologians, the "preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God," to recall McGinn's words, did not imply a retreat into isolation and a closing off from the surrounding world. Rather, it suggested a turning inward to discern the very roots of human existence and to communicate the divine love that is at its very heart.

The idea that the mystical doctrine of the early church presents a system of experiential theology that embraces a life of interiority as well as relationality will be explored throughout this study. By the end of our inquiry, we will return to the previous set of questions and hope to answer it more fully. For now, let us proceed by giving thought to a further set of introductory questions. Let us consider why the mystical teaching of early Christianity is so little known to today's religious seekers. If this teaching is as valuable in facilitating greater intimacy with God as is being suggested, what accounts for its long-standing neglect? How much of the teaching has been preserved, and who has been most instrumental in its transmission? What recent attempts have been made to retrieve and circulate Christianity's ancient legacy? Once we have considered these questions, we will discuss the teaching itself.

Reasons for the neglect of Christianity's mystical tradition are manifold, but one important factor appears to be the tendency on the part of past and present theologians to focus too much on the apologetic conceptualization of the Christian message and to

overlook its mystical dimension.¹⁷ Ironically, the seeds of this development were planted by the early church itself. As it struggled for survival in the pluralistic milieu of the late ancient Mediterranean world,¹⁸ the Jesus movement sought to establish the soundness and preeminence of its teaching by endowing it with a substantial philosophical underpinning. This was a pressing matter, for Christians were accused, at best, of adhering to a crude and simplistic philosophical outlook and, at worst, of engaging in superstitious, subversive practices that called for sporadic imperial persecution. Hard-pressed to refute life-threatening accusations, Christian apologists strove to establish the truth of their system by focusing on its logical explication.¹⁹

Once Christianity rose to prominence and established itself as the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, its adherents continued to focus on the intellectualization of the Christian message. Doctrinal controversies dictated the life of the church for centuries, and rarely have theologians articulated doctrines with such intellectual rigor and precision.²⁰ It is important to bear in mind, however, that, in these formative years, the definition and systematization of orthodox doctrine still went hand in hand with the fervent pursuit of contemplative, ascetical practices. Likewise, it is

¹⁷ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), pp. 269-270.

¹⁸ For helpful introductory discussions on the diversity of the Hellenistic world see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 3-28; Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, vol. 1, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987) pp. 47-60. The general atmosphere of the late ancient Mediterranean world and the deep sense of insecurity that prevailed is discussed in E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

¹⁹ Greek Apologists of the second century, such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, and Athenagoras, adopted this approach to state the Christian case to educated pagans. In the third century, the same approach was adopted by Clement of Alexandria, among others, who argued that Christianity had to come to terms with Greek philosophy if it was to be more than a religion for the uneducated. See W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985) pp. 172-184; González (1987), pp. 97-120; Dodds (1965), pp. 102-138; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition*, 5 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 27-41.

²⁰ The idea that the unity of the Roman Empire depended to a large degree on unity of faith and, hence, on the clarification and succinct exposition of Christian doctrine is addressed in John Meyendorff, *Imperial Unity and Christian Diversity* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1989), pp. 28-38; see also John Anthony McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), p. 5.

important to bear in mind that many early Christian theologians who were involved in conciliar debates were keenly aware of the fact that doctrinal theology was inseparably linked to mystical theology and that the minute explication of doctrinal matters safeguarded the inner, intuitive encounter with God.²¹

In the centuries that followed, interest in abstract discourse steadily increased. Despite the great popularity of the monastic movement during the Middle Ages and the decidedly mystical orientation of many medieval Christians, the church of the Latin West enforced the growing split between doctrinal and mystical teaching by lending its support to the scholastic movement.²² The idea that the study of theology implied an academic pursuit rather than a way of life became ever more pronounced. At the newly established medieval universities, professors of theology trained students to think of their discipline in highly abstract terms and to develop, first and foremost, their faculty of logical reasoning. Rarely did they seek to strengthen a student's inner eye through which to behold God intuitively.²³ The unified vision of human knowledge had broken down and given way to a distinction between head and heart, between the intellectual and the affective faculties.²⁴ This trend continued on into the Reformation.

Although Luther and a number of fellow reformers had been friars and monks and, as such, had been immersed in the contemplative life, the Reformation did little to heal the rift between Christianity's mystical and doctrinal legacy. Despite Luther's wish to replace medieval scholasticism with early Christian teaching and despite his emphasis on

²¹ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), pp. 8-11.

²² Paul Evdokimov, *Ages of the Spiritual Life* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), p. 180; Hadot (1995), p. 270.

²³ For more information on the difference between monastic/mystical theology and scholastic theology see Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), pp. 198-222.

²⁴ Sheldrake (1995), p. 202.

faith rather than reason as the wellspring of the Christian life, Luther's very emphasis on faith and its importance to the attainment of salvation further weakened the influence of the mystical tradition. Henceforth, the ascetical life was to be adopted in response to God's free gift of love in Christ rather than as a means of seeking divine reconciliation and, hence, ceased to be viewed as a vital instrument of salvation.²⁵ Faith rather than merit opened the path to God and, all Christians, whether monastics or not, could lead a holy existence.²⁶

Luther's proposal to universalize the monastic ideal and the ensuing decline in establishments that provided the setting for a life of interiority marked a further step in the progressive neglect of Christianity's mystical heritage. By the time Europe entered the modern period, this heritage had been largely forgotten, having been replaced by a tradition that favored a formalistic, conceptual understanding of Christian teaching.²⁷ Following the climate of the time, many churches supported the discovery of scientific truths which were not subject to excess, distortion, and exploitation.²⁸

The rationalistic approach to the Christian message has guided the churches, primarily the churches of the Christian West, for many centuries. Still today, theological circles may not always be at ease with a teaching that is experiential in approach and, given this sentiment, may inadvertently contribute to the ongoing neglect of Christianity's

²⁵ As this comment suggests, Luther did not reject monasticism out of hand. Initially, he criticized the monastic life with the intention of serving rather than attacking this form of religious existence. It was only later, in 1521, that he condemned monasticism. See Dorothea Wendebourg, "Luther on Monasticism," *Lutheran Quarterly* 19.2 (Summer 2005): 133.

²⁶ Ian Hart, "The Teaching of Luther and Calvin about Ordinary Work: I Martin Luther (1483-1546)," *Evangelical Quarterly* 67.1 (1995): 51.

²⁷ Adrian Hastings, "Reason," pp. 596-597, in *OCCT*, ed. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 596; Alistair Mason, "Enlightenment," pp. 200-201, in *OCCT*, p. 201.

²⁸ Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), p. 242.

mystical tradition.²⁹ At the same time, let us take note of the fact that this tradition, while obscured, has not been wholly lost and that today increasing effort is being made to retrieve and reintroduce it to the lives of Western religious seekers.

Since Christianity's ancient mystical heritage survives primarily as a lived system in the Christian East, it is here that the process of retrieving and circulating this heritage has been largely conducted. If we wish to understand why the churches of the Eastern Orthodox tradition rather than those of the Christian West have served as repositories for this valuable teaching, we might list a number of reasons, an important one being the more liturgical and less apologetic orientation of the former churches.³⁰ It is also helpful to note that Eastern Orthodoxy has been exposed to an unbroken stream of monastic teaching, from late antiquity up to the present, and, therefore, has been better equipped than Western churches to preserve the inherent unity of doctrinal and mystical teaching.³¹ It has allowed churches of the Orthodox tradition to prevent the progressive rationalization of their teaching and to follow the ancient dictum of expressing faith in prayer to a degree otherwise not possible.³²

In the Christian East, the ancient mystical writings have been preserved primarily in Orthodox monasteries, where monks have studied them closely and applied their

²⁹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 3.

³⁰ The liturgical nature of the Eastern Orthodox tradition is brought to the fore in the following passage: "The normal Orthodox lay worshipper, through familiarity from earliest childhood, is entirely at home in the church, thoroughly conversant with the audible parts of the Holy Liturgy, and takes part with unconscious and unstudied ease in the action of the rite, to an extent only shared in by the hyper-devout and ecclesiastically minded in the west." Austin Oakley, *The Orthodox Liturgy* (London: Mowbray; New York: Morehouse-Gorham, 1958), p. 12, cited in Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1997), pp. 266-267. Wybrew suggests the liturgical nature of the Eastern churches by comparing the Western Eucharist and the Orthodox Liturgy and distinguishing between the simplicity, formality, and brevity of the former and the ceremonial, participatory, and lengthy nature of the latter. See Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), pp. 1-11.

³¹ Lossky (1998), p. 14; Sheldrake (1998), p. 38.

³² Ware (1997a), pp. 204-205.

teaching on a daily basis.³³ Since this teaching is of a very experiential nature, speaking as it does of the direct encounter with God, its practical application and transmission by example from master to disciple have proven to be vital to its survival in highly influential monastic centers, such as Mount Athos, Moldavia, and Optina. Within this context, the monastic communities of Mount Athos, a peninsula off mainland northern Greece, are of particular interest for serving as strongholds of Orthodoxy since the tenth century.³⁴ The Athonite communities were instrumental to the revival of early Christian mystical thought by compiling the *Philokalia*, a large collection of ascetical texts dating from the fourth to the fifteenth century, during the second half of the eighteenth century.³⁵ The *Philokalia* was translated into Russian by Paisius Velichkovsky (1722-1794),³⁶ the founder of modern Eastern Orthodox staretsdom, who exerted great influence on the hermitages of Moldavia as well as on Optina Monastery. Optina was the focus of a powerful renewal movement that spread through Russia in the nineteenth century.

The *Philokalia*, which features prominently in this study, has been deeply influential in the Eastern Orthodox world and, since its translation into English from the early 1970s onward, has been instrumental in familiarizing Western Christians with ancient practices of their tradition. Likewise of great value to this study and, more importantly, to the Christian community at large are the many ancient writings that have

³³ McGuckin (2002), pp. 6-7.

³⁴ Ware (1997a), pp. 38-39; Lossky (1998), p. 19. In his quest for "certain places where ancient truths still dwell" and for "connections with surviving students of those who have sought the same knowledge," Amis visited the monastery of St. Andrew on Mount Athos and describes it as an important source of early Christian mystical teaching, Amis (1995), p. 2.

³⁵ Kallistos Ware, "The Hesychast Renaissance," pp. 255-258 in *The Study of Spirituality*, ed. C. Jones, G. Wainwright, and E. Yarnold (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 256-257; idem (1997), p. 100. The *Philokalia* was edited by Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and Makarios of Corinth and published in Venice in 1782.

³⁶ For information on this important modern spiritual master, see John Anthony McGuckin, "The Life and Mission of St. Paisius Velichkovsky: 1722-1794," in *Almanahul Credinta* (Chicago IL: The Romanian Orthodox Archdiocese in the Americas, 2008), pp. 115-122.

been made available in series, such as the Classics of Western Spirituality Series issued by the Paulist Press. In recent years, Orthodox presses have provided religious seekers with further means of studying Christianity's ancient heritage by publishing extensive series on the teachings of renowned spiritual elders, most notably the Lives of Saints Series by the Chrysostom Press, the Mount Athos Series by the Alexander Press, and the Optina Elders Series by the St. Herman of Alaska Press. Special mention may also be made of the valuable translations of Syriac ascetical texts provided by contemporary scholars, such as Sebastian Brock and David Miller.

Despite the fact that many original writings have been lost, survive only in fragments, or have been distorted,³⁷ we are thus in possession of a sizable body of work that features timeless insights into the soul's movement toward God. Given the increasing availability of these ancient texts and, hence, our ability to gain a deeper understanding of Christianity's neglected heritage, we can thus hope to repristinate an experiential theology for the present age. By subjecting the writings of early Christians to careful study, we can hope to rediscover valuable means of establishing greater intimacy with God and of finding inner peace. The present study hopes to contribute, in some small measure, to this endeavor.

³⁷ Origen's monumental body of work, for instance, was grievously ruined by the imperial and synodical hostility shown to his legacy from the fourth through the sixth centuries. A similar misfortune has diminished the existent writings of his loyal follower, Evagrius of Pontus. Unfortunate, too, is the fact that hardly any Syriac literature from earlier than the fourth century has survived, literature that, more than any other Syriac literature, bears witness to the Semitic heritage of this strand of early Christian thought. In view of the frequent oral transmission of Christianity's ancient teaching and the elusive nature of the experience it seeks to offer instruction on, the preservation of this material has, no doubt, been problematic from the outset. See John Anthony McGuckin, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Louisville, KE: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 25; idem, *Westminster Handbook of Patristic Theology* (Louisville, KE: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 133; Sebastian Brock, *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), p. xv.

We have now considered the questions of why the Christian mystical teaching was obscured, how it was preserved, and what attempts have been made of late to reintroduce it to the main body of Christian doctrine. At this point, it is helpful to provide a broad outline of the content of this teaching and to establish some familiarity with the material at hand. A more detailed inquiry into the mystical thought of prominent church fathers along with an examination of relevant primary sources will be conducted in the main body of the study. In the hope of conducting the exploration of Christianity's mystical heritage in as informed and lucid a manner as possible, one particular doctrine has been chosen as the focal point of inquiry, the doctrine of the prayer of the heart. The doctrine of the prayer of the heart is central to Christianity's mystical legacy, and its elucidation promises to shed much light on the nature of this valuable teaching.³⁸

The Doctrine of the Prayer of the Heart

The doctrine of the prayer of the heart exemplifies the dynamic transformation of human beings through their personal encounter with God. It has its beginning among the desert communities and ascetical teachers of ancient Egypt, Palestine, and Syria and takes as its starting-point the biblical notion of the heart as the very center of a person. In this tradition, the heart is the deep place in human beings where all life originates; it serves as the seat of every intellectual, emotional, volutative, moral, and spiritual activity. In the heart, the image of God was implanted at the beginning of time, and it is by purifying this

³⁸ Helpful introductions to the prayer of the heart are provided in the following works: George Maloney, *Prayer of the Heart* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1981); John Anthony McGuckin, *Standing in God's Holy Fire: The Byzantine Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001); idem, "The Prayer of the Heart in Patristic & Early Byzantine Tradition," pp. 69-108, in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, vol. 2, ed. P. Allen, W. Mayer, and L. Cross (Queensland: Australian Catholic University, 1999); Kallistos Ware, "The Eastern Fathers" and "The Eastern Tradition," in Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold (1986), pp. 159-160, 175-183; idem, "Ways of Prayer and Contemplation (Eastern)," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the 12thC*, ed. B. McGinn, J. Meyendorff, and J. Leclercq (New York: Crossroad, 1997), pp. 395-414.

image that direct contact with God can be reestablished. While human beings are prone to error and have grievously neglected to preserve the initial purity and radiance of the inner image, it can be cleansed and restored to its former splendor if individuals submit to a gradual process of purification, illumination, and perfection. By leading the Christian life of daily prayer and asceticism, by gaining in virtue, understanding, and spiritual discernment, humans can discern the abiding presence of Divinity in the heart and find inner peace.³⁹

The idea that spiritual progress is not brought about through intellectual effort and theological speculation but rather through the persistent daily engagement in extended prayer, ascetical practices, active service, and the liturgical life of the church is an important aspect of the prayer of the heart. Detailed guidelines on how to persevere in this stringent way of life and on how to overcome the many obstacles placed by God's foes in the path of mystical seekers can be found, for instance, in the *Philokalia*, the above mentioned compilation of early Christian ascetical texts first collated and published in 1782. At this point, let us consider some of the teachings that are presented in this compilation. Since the present study seeks to explore, among other things, the intrinsic value with which early Christian ascetics endowed embodied existence, let us get a first sense of how they conveyed this viewpoint in their writings.

Early Christian teachers of the mystical life commonly divided the quest for God into three stages, the stages of *praktike*, *physike*, and *theologike*.⁴⁰ The stage of *praktike* introduced Christians to the life of prayer and asceticism. It gave them the opportunity to

³⁹ This understanding is distinctly different from familiar Western theological axioms about humanity's fall from grace and the lasting divide between humanity and deity. We will return to this issue in the upcoming discussion of the early Christian doctrine of *theosis*.

⁴⁰ The triadic division of the mystical journey presented in the upcoming paragraphs is most in line with the teaching of Evagrius of Pontus. While it is helpful to organize the journey into three consecutive stages, it is worth bearing in mind that these stages are not as distinct as they are made to appear. Although they are successive, they are interdependent and overlap. Helpful expositions of Evagrius's triadic schema can be found in Louth (1981), pp. 102-113; McGuckin (2001), pp. 41-54; Ware (1997), pp. 397-399.

begin the process of exploring and cleansing the terrain of the heart and of gradually deepening their quest. Spiritual elders sought to guide novices toward inner silence and concentrated prayer by showing them how to control the many distractions of their restless minds.

The form of prayer most commonly practiced was monologistic prayer. While performing their daily manual labors, religious seekers memorized by heart, recited, and reflected upon a short, poignant phrase throughout the day. Most often, this phrase was a scriptural passage, especially a passage taken from the Psalms, or a brief spiritual teaching.⁴¹ Its continuous recitation was an important means of preserving the memory of God and of becoming aware of a deep inner sense of *penthos*, a feeling of compunction and grief for past sins.⁴² By remembering God at all times and focusing their entire attention on the movement of the repenting heart, practitioners of monologistic prayer were temporarily able to suspend the clamor of inner demonic voices and to enter into deep silence, or *hesychia*. Initially, these moments of interior silence were fleeting. With experience, however, they grew longer and allowed monastics to become increasingly aware of God's inner presence.

For early Christian ascetics, the suspension of demonic voices was a pressing matter. They knew from painful experience that God's foes were ever concerned to prevent deep absorption in Divinity and that they sought to do so by incensing the human mind with distracting thoughts. Once these thoughts, or *logismoi*, had been instilled in the mind, they manifested themselves on the somatic level and gave rise to passionate

⁴¹ McGuckin (2002), p. 7.

⁴² Irénée Hausherr, *The Name of Jesus* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1978), pp. 82-105, pp. 158-165. For a detailed discussion of the concept of *penthos* see idem, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1982).

impulses and thwarted behavior. The only means of controlling these impulses and behaviors was to keep the body continuously preoccupied by engaging in ascetical practices, such as extended fasts, manual labor, physical prostrations, and long nighttime vigils.⁴³ If these practices were performed with care and diligence, they were strikingly effective and allowed novices to regain control over their bodies. Demonic maneuvers could progressively be checked and practitioners of monologistic prayer were able to observe more closely the nature and complexity of their thought processes and behavioral patterns. Gradually, novices came to better understand themselves and to lead a less erratic, distorted existence. They were able to experience the onset of inner silence which, if steadily deepened, would eventually reveal God's presence in the heart.

After acquiring sufficient tools to control the manifold stirrings of the body in the initial stage of the quest, religious seekers moved beyond physical asceticism in the second phase of their journey, the stage of *physike*, and engaged in noetic asceticism. They continued to still the mind while receiving instruction on how to sharpen their capacity for intellectual comprehension and for the discernment of God's presence in the created order. Initially, aspirants were taught to acquire these new skills by contemplating the nature of the material universe. Later, they were encouraged to discern God's all-pervasive presence by contemplating the nature of the spiritual universe.⁴⁴ In this manner, individuals became increasingly adept at seeing God in all things and all things in God. They began to perceive spiritual truths intuitively.⁴⁵

⁴³ McGuckin (2001), p. 46.

⁴⁴ Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 107-108.

⁴⁵ Ware (1997b), p. 398.

By the last stage of the mystical path, the stage of *theologike*, practitioners were able to perceive God in a direct and personal way deep in themselves. Capable of controlling bodily impulses and inner thought processes and well-trained in the discernment of spiritual realities, ascetics rose above concepts, words, and images and entered the realm of divine incomprehensibility. Here, they encountered God beyond understanding and discerned the presence of Divinity intuitively, through 'gazing' or 'touching.'⁴⁶ This mystical intuition of God was deeply transformative. It emanated from the heart where the wholly Other drew uniquely close in a union of love. Without forfeiting their personal identity, religious seekers were assumed into the life of Divinity and partook of God's nature.⁴⁷ We will have more to say on the nature of the deifying union with God in due course.

Early Christians viewed the idea of perceiving God intuitively on the deepest level of their being, in the heart, as the hallmark of inner prayer. The heart was the place of encounter between God and the individual and, hence, the focal point of human awareness. However, because of its unique position as God's dwelling-place, the heart was also the focal point of demonic attention. Demons never wavered in their effort to beleaguer this inner region and to prevent the divine-human encounter.

Fully aware of the intricacies and dangers of demonic scheming, monastics of the early church emphasized the importance of guarding the heart at all times and of preventing its infiltration by impure, distracting thoughts. The eighth century Sinai Abbot Hesychius, for instance, admonishes his disciples to "Be attentive to yourself, lest there

⁴⁶ Ware (1997b), p. 399.

⁴⁷ Ware (1997b), p. 411.

arise in your heart a secret thing which is an iniquity' (Deut. 15:9. LXX). Here the phrase 'a secret thing' refers to the first appearance of an evil thought. This the Fathers call a provocation introduced into the heart by the devil."⁴⁸ For Hesychius, as for so many other early Christians, the encounter with God could take place only if the heart was closely guarded and if all demonic attempts to jeopardize a person's spiritual progress were thwarted at the very outset. It was the only means by which practitioners could immerse themselves in deep silence and begin to perceive God's inner presence.

While members of the ancient church were well aware that the infiltration of the heart by impure, distracting thoughts had dire consequences and gave rise to uncontrollable desires which manifested themselves on a physical level, they did not consider the body *per se* an evil thing or a punishment.⁴⁹ Misconduct was not a reflection on the fallenness of the body but rather a sign that the mind had not yet won the struggle with impassioned thoughts and needed to gain greater self-control as well as deeper understanding of a person's intrapsychic reality. The body, early Christians proposed, was essential to the mystical quest and served as a valuable means by which the soul could rise back into the presence of Divinity. Indeed, the body was the temple of God and, as such, uniquely equipped to provide direct access to the divine. Its faculties of perception and intuitive wisdom revealed the inner presence of Deity where intellectual aspiration failed. As mentor to the soul, the body checked its charge's impatience and pride. It provided the testing ground on which Christians proved their love for God and their commitment to the mystical quest. If the humble body, despite its many merits,

⁴⁸ Hesychius of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 2, in *Philokalia*, vol. 1, compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain & St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. & ed. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 162.

⁴⁹ McGuckin (2001), pp. 39-40.

nevertheless fell prey to disordered passions, these could be checked before they manifested themselves in the form of jealous, lustful, and angry behavior through physical asceticism. Physical asceticism was practiced to discipline thwarted impulses. It is important to note that it was not practiced with the intention of controlling and disciplining the body itself.

The idea that early Christians did not condemn the body may strike some readers as surprising, especially when calling to mind Christianity's Platonic and Hellenistic-dualistic background. What may strike some readers as equally surprising is the fundamental tenet of the early church that it is not only possible for human beings to become aware of God's presence in the materially rooted consciousness but that the physical body is the locus of divine self-revelation and, as such, the means by which humans enter into direct communion with God. Let us now consider an important early Christian doctrine that exemplifies this tenet and that shapes the tradition of the prayer of the heart to a decisive degree, the doctrine of deification.⁵⁰

The doctrine of deification, *theopoiesis*, or *theosis*, bears witness to the strong incarnational spirit of early Christian mystical thought by presenting a compelling vision of human wholeness and suggesting that people's quest for God culminates in their ability to 'partake in the divine nature' and to 'become god.'⁵¹ This is an astounding proposition, especially for Christians familiar with the notions of original sin, creaturely finitude, and

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the concept of deification see Clément (1993), pp. 263-269; Lossky (1998), pp. 67-68, 133-136, 180-182; McGuckin (2004b), pp. 98-99.

⁵¹ Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Witting, "Introduction," pp. 11-15, in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Witting (Madison NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), p. 15 nn. 1, 2. As the editors point out, the former phrase derives from 2 Peter 1:4. The coining of the latter expression derives from Athanasius's *On the Incarnation* 54.

redemptive grace which characterize the theology of Augustine and of the post-Augustinian Christian West to such a decisive degree. Western Christians in particular may point to the unbridgeable gulf between God and humanity, between divine perfection and creaturely imperfection, and wonder how it is possible for a person to become divine without negating the essential divine-human distinction.⁵²

Early Christian theologians addressed this matter by suggesting that a person's ability to partake of God's nature is the result of a process over the course of which the individual gradually conforms to God and assumes divine qualities without, however, becoming like God in essence.⁵³ Humans become gods by adoption and in response to the bestowal of the grace of union; they do not become gods in their essential nature. This understanding is exemplified by the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa and his notion of *epektasis* which refers to the essential energy of human life as an infinite expansion of the soul toward the absolutely transcendent God. On the one hand, Gregory posits that the soul can experience real participation in Divinity, which is effected through the process of infinite becoming and the infinity of the source to which the soul seeks to be reunited.⁵⁴ The created, finite soul becomes divine to the extent to which it resembles God in its ability to experience the unbounded expansion into the latter's presence. On the other hand, Gregory insists on the lasting ontological divide between God and the soul. Since Divinity is wholly transcendent, the soul is unable to gain full knowledge of Divinity. While the soul continually reaches out to God, it is unable ever to satisfy its deep

⁵² James S. Cutsinger, ed., *Not of This World: A Treasury of Christian Mysticism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), p. xvii; Michael J. Christensen, "The Problem, Promise, and Process of *Theosis*," pp. 23-28, in Christensen and Witting (2007), p. 28.

⁵³ Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 2.

⁵⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essays on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1995), p. 38.

yearning for divine comprehension.⁵⁵

Despite the understanding that the process of deification does not entail the negation of ontological diversity, Gregory of Nyssa and fellow early Christian theologians suggested that *theosis* allows for the real reconstitution of human nature and for lasting change. By conforming progressively to God and coming to share in divine properties, individuals are freed of the many distortions and corruptions they bring upon themselves by misusing their God-given capacities.⁵⁶ They are able to return to an earlier, incorrupt state of being and to reexperience their original state of glory. Because early Christians believed that deification never implies the transcending of human nature but rather the fulfillment of what it means to be truly human, participation in divine life also implies a return to full humanity. Humanity is never an obstacle to intimacy with Divinity. On the contrary, we can commune with God only if we are fully human.⁵⁷

The proximity of divinity and humanity and our ability to participate in divine life is nowhere expressed more forcefully than in the doctrine of incarnation, to which early Christian teachers of inner prayer were deeply committed. As central to the notion of deification (and, hence, to the tradition of the prayer of the heart) as it is to the entire Christian message, the doctrine of the incarnation addresses the decisive moment at which the eternal Logos, by assuming flesh, lifted humankind into the mystery of his personal divinity.⁵⁸ The Word infused a body with divine, life-giving energy and accomplished the union of God and humans 'without confusion or change,' but also

⁵⁵ Louth (1981), pp. 88-89.

⁵⁶ Andrew Louth, "The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology," pp. 32-44, in Christensen and Witting (2007), p. 37.

⁵⁷ Louth (2007), p. 39.

⁵⁸ John Anthony McGuckin, "The Strategic Adaptation of Deification in the Cappadocians," pp. 95-114, in Christensen and Witting (2007), p. 97.

‘without division or separation.’⁵⁹ This communion of created and uncreated properties, or hypostases, refashioned the boundaries of all created life and allowed for the extension of its boundaries beyond earlier limitations.⁶⁰ Communicating its own powers and privileges, the Logos enabled humans to be swept up in divine life and to become gods by adoption. Body and soul were transformed by the glory of Divinity.

The idea that the suffusion of human flesh by divine energy allows for participation in divine life accords a prominent role to the body in the quest for God. No doubt, it calls into question the often-held belief that early Christian ascetics advocated a Platonic, if not an outright dualistic outlook, and postulated the dichotomy of body and soul. Largely instigated by the rise of scholasticism and the increasingly sharp distinction between mind and matter, this belief has dominated the thinking of many Western theologians up to the present.⁶¹ All too frequently, it has been their view that members of the ancient church failed to plead the Christian message of the incarnation with sufficient conviction.⁶² Given their alleged Platonizing tendencies, early Christians are thought to have relied too readily on a worldview that challenged the primacy of material existence and to have called into question the integrity of created, bodily existence. Even as informed a scholar as von Balthasar has suggested that early Christians, especially of the Greek-speaking world, proceeded unambiguously away from the material to the spiritual and articulated a teaching that sits uneasily with a dogma as fundamental to incarnational

⁵⁹ The precise nature of this union was debated and decreed by the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE which was essentially a Christological controversy. For an in-depth discussion of the controversy see John Anthony McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

⁶⁰ McGuckin (2007), p. 97.

⁶¹ Sheldrake (1998), p. 3.

⁶² Adam G. Cooper, *The Body in St Maximus the Confessor* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 4.

Christianity as the resurrection of the body.⁶³ E. R. Dodds has gone as far as to suggest that “contempt for the human condition and hatred of the body was a disease endemic in the entire culture of the period; that while its more extreme manifestations are mainly Christian or Gnostic, its symptoms show themselves in a milder form in pagans of purely Hellenic education.”⁶⁴ Dodds is also of the opinion that Origen, for instance, maintained the substance of the Gnostic view and resembles later desert fathers who engaged in continuous physical self-torture.⁶⁵

There can be little doubt that the Platonic tendency to distinguish between a spiritual reality and all that is invisible, incorporeal, and immortal on the one hand and the physical, transient realm on the other hand had a lasting impact on the theology of the ancient church, not least on its mystical doctrine.⁶⁶ It is also correct to argue that the doctrines of world-denying dualistic movements left their mark on early Christian theologians who, inadvertently, were influenced by the very teachings they set out to attack.⁶⁷ However, this study wishes to suggest that these influences are but part of a larger picture. It posits that the passage from earthly to heavenly and from temporal to eternal which was championed by early Christian theologians does not so much suggest the severing of ties with material existence as the reorienting of a person’s sensible,

⁶³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Fathers, the Scholastics, and Ourselves,” *Communio* 24 (1997): 375, cited in Cooper (2005), p. 5.

⁶⁴ Dodds (1965), p. 35.

⁶⁵ Dodds (1965), p. 33.

⁶⁶ For a valuable work discussing the impact of Platonism (or rather Middle Platonism) on the mystical doctrine of the early church see Louth (1981).

⁶⁷ The relationship between the early church and the Gnostic movement is complex indeed. Despite the attempt by ancient theologians, such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian, to refute the teaching of their Gnostic contemporaries, there can be little doubt that it exerted a lasting impact on Christianity. See, for instance, John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea: The Formation of Christian Theology*, vol. 1 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), PHEME PERKINS, *The Gnostic Dialogue: The Early Church and the Crisis of Gnosticism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980).

emotional, and rational faculties to God.⁶⁸ This study proposes that early Christian practitioners of inner prayer valued humanity's incarnate existence to a greater degree than is often acknowledged and declared their creation- and body-centered stance by basing their teaching on the Christian belief in the incarnation, in the deification of all of human nature (including the body), in the material universe as a place where the divine presence manifests itself, and in the heart as God's earthly dwelling-place.

This study further proposes that the world-affirming nature of Christianity's mystical heritage is expressed also by the emphasis theologians placed on relationality and by their belief that the outer life nourishes rather than throttles the inner life.⁶⁹ Teachers of inner prayer insisted that the body and the community of the church are vital means of propelling the Christian into the presence of God. Without caring for the body and seeking its reintegration with the soul, without caring for the neighbor by practicing 'love in action,'⁷⁰ early Christians deemed it impossible to advance along the mystical path.

In the hope of establishing the world-affirming stance of Christian mystical thought, the focus throughout much of this study will rest on the idea that ascetics of the early church never envisioned the quest for God as a cerebral, isolated endeavor but rather as a way of life that was rooted in material, communal existence. Spiritual guides called upon their disciples to commit to a way of life that was inherently relational and that taught them to relate more fully to themselves—including their bodies, to their neighbors, and to the world at large. In this manner, masters of the inner life believed

⁶⁸ Cooper (2005), p. 20.

⁶⁹ Cooper (2005), p. 8.

⁷⁰ Olivier Clement, *On Human Being: A Spiritual Anthropology* (New York: New City Press, 2000), p. 65, pp. 96-97.

humans capable of softening their hardened hearts and of transforming them into hearts of flesh. They believed that individuals could be reintroduced to a state of integration and come to discern God's abiding presence in their deepest selves, if they met the challenges of day-to-day existence with courage and humility. For them, the trials of embodied, social life were the true testing ground on which Christians displayed their commitment to the mystical quest and where they effected their progressive deification.

With these introductory comments on the prayer of the heart in mind, we will now consider pertinent research on the Christian mystical tradition in general and on the prayer of the heart in particular. As we do so, special attention will be given to recent scholarship that examines the connection between inner prayer and the holistic concept of the heart as the symbol of personal unity. Once we have examined this research, we will be in a better position to establish in which instances the present study draws on earlier findings and how it seeks to deepen our present understanding of Christianity's mystical heritage.

Historiographical Considerations

Sooner or later, anyone exploring the early Christian mystical tradition and the doctrine of the prayer of the heart in particular will encounter research that distinguishes between two prominent strands of ascetical teaching, the noetic, intellectual strand and the heart-centered, affective strand. The former is associated, first and foremost, with Origen and Evagrius, two important early Christian theologians who embraced Platonic teaching, in particular its doctrine of the mind's escape from matter and ascent toward immaterial, spiritual heights. The latter strand is commonly linked with Syriac

Christianity and its strong Semitic heritage, a heritage that focuses on the heart as the place where human beings become aware of God's presence. Byzantine mystical thought is viewed as the harmonizing force of these two currents.

Irénée Hausherr (1891-1978) and Vladimir Lossky (1903-1958) are two important theologians to consider in any discussion of early Christian mystical thought and its history. In 1935, Hausherr, a French Jesuit, published two articles of great influence, "Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale" and "L'erreur fondamentale et la logique du Messalianisme."⁷¹ In the first article, Hausherr offers a taxonomy of Eastern Christian spirituality by presenting six currents or schools of spirituality, among which he numbers the "spiritualité intellectualiste," which is rooted in the teachings of the Alexandrians Clement and Origen as well as the later Evagrius, and the "école du sentiment ou de surnaturel conscient," which Hausherr associates primarily with the anonymous author of the Macarian corpus. The former strand, he suggests, has a pronounced philosophical underpinning and looks to the intellect as the faculty that defines human nature at its most fundamental level. Adherents of this school of thought consider the contemplation of divine light as the essentially Platonic goal of the mystical life.⁷² Unlike representatives of the intellective approach, members of the 'school of sentiment' insist on the sensible perception of grace. The discernment of the Holy Spirit is a visceral, tangible experience. Little emphasis is placed on the intellect or the will as the seat of divine apprehension.⁷³

While Hausherr juxtaposes these two strands, he does not insist on a fixed classification and, in his later article, presents a more subtle analysis of the intellective-

⁷¹ Irénée Hausherr, "Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale," *Orientalia christiana periodica* 1 (1935a): 114-138; idem, "L'erreur fondamentale et la logique du Messalianisme," *OCP* 1 (1935b): 328-360.

⁷² Hausherr (1935a): 122-123.

⁷³ Hausherr (1935a): 127.

affective categorization.⁷⁴ In this article, he distinguishes within the affective strand itself and points to Macarius as an intermediary figure between the intellectual approach of Evagrius and the overtly affective, physical Messalian approach. Despite this more nuanced reading, Hausherr does, however, maintain his basic distinction between the two schools of thought and, by doing so, introduces a way of compartmentalizing Christianity's mystical heritage that has been of lasting influence.

A very similar approach is adopted by Lossky in his classic study *The Mystical Tradition of the Eastern Church*, published in 1944. In it, the renowned Orthodox theologian explores Origen's legacy and suggests that the Alexandrian thinker, by virtue of his pronounced noetic orientation, is not truly representative of the Eastern Christian tradition. Distinguishing between Christian mysticism and the mystical philosophy of the Neo-Platonist, between the God of revelation and the God of philosophers, Lossky assigns Origen to the latter categories and argues that "with Origen, Hellenism attempts to creep into the Church. . . . It is for this reason that the Church has had to fight against 'Origenism' as she has always fought against doctrines which, in striking at the divine incomprehensibility, replaced the experience of the unfathomable depths of God by philosophical concepts."⁷⁵

For Lossky, the hallmark of Christianity is not the speculation about abstract principles. Christianity is not a 'theology of concepts' or a religious philosophy, a stance he believes Origen and his followers to have adopted. The hallmark of Christianity lies in the deep contemplation of Divinity beyond understanding where the mysterious,

⁷⁴ For a discussion of this feature, see Marcus Plested, *The Macarian Legacy: The Place of Macarius-Symeon in the Eastern Christian Tradition* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 59.

⁷⁵ Lossky (1998), pp. 32-33.

incomprehensible God of revelation is known experientially in a deifying union.⁷⁶ Lossky points to Macarius, a chief representative of the Syrian tradition, as a prime example of this approach.⁷⁷ Unlike Origen and Evagrius who are wont to focus on the radiant vision of God in the *nous* and the mind's knowledge of its own divinity which procures beatitude, Macarius points to the importance of contemplating God in the pure atmosphere of the heart.⁷⁸ Lossky suggests that Macarius and ancient teachers of similar sentiment who sought to have God within themselves rather than to know something about God are the true representatives of the Eastern Christian tradition.

Lossky's objective is not to engage in a detailed analysis of Macarius or of Syrian Christianity and his discussion of this tradition is cursory. Nor does he propose the juxtaposition of the Macarian corpus to the legacy of Origen. Nevertheless, his discussion introduces a close association of Macarian, Syrian theology with a heart-felt, intuitive understanding of God on the one hand and of the Origenian tradition with intellectual striving on the other hand. In doing so, Lossky's work suggests the incompatibility of these teachings and encourages their categorization into two distinct schools of thought. Like the schema of Hausherr, this classification was embraced by subsequent researchers and has come to define the discourse on early Christian mystical thought to a decisive degree.

One such researcher is George Maloney (1924-2005), the prominent scholar of Eastern Christianity and prolific spiritual writer. In his monograph on the prayer of the heart, in which he examines the history of this ancient tradition, its salient features, and

⁷⁶ Lossky (1998), pp. 34-43.

⁷⁷ Lossky (1998), p. 68.

⁷⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), p. 38.

the deifying state it seeks to induce, he distinguishes between an early Christian heart spirituality and an early Christian intellectual spirituality. Like Hausherr and Lossky, Maloney views the Macarian corpus as an important representative of the former tradition while pointing to the writings of Clement, Origen, and Evagrius, the so-called 'Christian Platonists,' as chief witnesses to the latter school of thought.⁷⁹ The former writings reflect a Semitic influence and speak of the existential encounter with God in the heart. They advocate the transformation of the total human being—body, soul, and spirit—and call upon Christians to focus on the intuitive knowledge of God in their deepest selves.⁸⁰ For Maloney, this integrative approach to the mystical life is distinct from the position adopted by followers of the noetic tradition. Drawing on Christianity's Hellenistic heritage, especially on Platonism and Stoicism, adherents of this mystical school "developed the spiritual life as a form of Christian Gnosticism."⁸¹ Maloney suggests that, for them, the Christian is the gnostic who longs for the soul's return to the immaterial realm and a light-filled final vision of Divinity that transcends all materiality. Despite his emphasis on the abstract, logical approach of this tradition, Maloney does, however, caution readers not to reduce this mystical teaching to mere intellectualism. It presupposes a genuine spiritual gift and a way of life that embraces the daily, very practical application of theoretical insights.⁸²

In his work *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, Andrew Louth adopts a similar stance and distinguishes between the tradition of Evagrius and the tradition of Macarius. The former is intellectualist in orientation and owes much to late classical

⁷⁹ Maloney (1981), pp. 26-29; idem, "Introduction," pp. 1-33, in *Pseudo-Macarius, The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 1-3.

⁸⁰ Maloney (1992), p. 2.

⁸¹ Maloney (1992), p. 2.

⁸² Maloney (1992), p. 3.

philosophy and to Origen.⁸³ The latter tradition, Louth suggests, bears the mark of Syrian teaching and of the Messalian sect in particular.⁸⁴ It is deeply experiential and focuses on the soul's real physical perception of God in prayer.⁸⁵ While Louth discusses both traditions as distinct schools of thought, presenting them in terms of a spirituality of the heart versus a spirituality of the mind or *nous*,⁸⁶ it is of interest to note that he tempers his approach by remarking that this categorization should not be exaggerated. Evagrius, too, speaks of the heart and the importance of feeling in prayer. We will consider passages confirming this point of view in the upcoming discussion of Evagrius's contributions to the prayer of the heart tradition.

In his comprehensive handbook of Eastern Christian spirituality, the Czech Jesuit Thomas Špidlík, a disciple of Hausherr, also distinguishes between various strands of mystical thought.⁸⁷ Syrian theologians are aligned with a practical, primitive⁸⁸ spirituality that owes much to its Judaic roots, and the Macarian corpus is viewed as the quintessential expression of a mysticism of the heart which greatly prizes the vivid experience of God.⁸⁹ Špidlík contrasts experiential spirituality to intellectualized spirituality and suggests that adherents of the latter tradition are "steeped in the type of Hellenism that long before had heard from Anaxagoras himself that the end of life consists in *theoria*, knowledge, understanding, contemplation—an axiom preserved by

⁸³ Louth (1981), pp. 100-113.

⁸⁴ Louth (1981), pp. 113-116. The question of Macarius's relationship to Messalianism continues to be a matter of debate. It will be addressed in the upcoming chapter on Macarius.

⁸⁵ Louth (1981), p. 115.

⁸⁶ Louth (1981), p. 116.

⁸⁷ Thomas Špidlík, *The Spirituality of the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986), pp. 17-22.

⁸⁸ As will hopefully become apparent in the discussion of this early Christian mystical current, its teachings are anything but 'primitive' or non-intellectual. It is a characterization that fails to capture the sophistication and richness of Syrian ascetical thought.

⁸⁹ Špidlík (1986), pp. 17-21.

Clement of Alexandria.”⁹⁰ Practitioners of this mystical approach condemn images and sensory expression and deem the world of matter a source of distraction. For the eye of the mind to be opened, the bodily eye has to be closed. It is essential that the gnostic’s spiritual eye be illuminated by faith and its gaze purified of all attachment to matter.⁹¹

Like Louth, however, Špidlík is careful not to press this categorization. Very aware of the complexity of early Christian mystical teaching, he prefers to speak of its various expressions in terms of trends rather than distinct schools of thought. While differences between these trends can be pronounced, teachings nevertheless overlap. Ascetics who embraced the intellectualized approach and sought detachment from matter engaged in natural contemplation and tried to discern the presence of God in the created order. They, too, knew that as “one climbs with great difficulty from one intellectual concept to another and once the most sublime level of speculation has been reached one discovers that God is still far away; thereupon one chooses another path, that of ‘ignorance’ and that of ‘love’ or ‘ecstasy.’”⁹²

The joining of various ascetical teachings marks the prayer of the heart tradition to a decisive degree. By the end of the study, the extent to which this fusion characterizes the ancient practice will hopefully have become more apparent. At this point, let us consider the work of Kallistos Ware and John McGuckin, two scholars who have drawn attention to the fact that the two strands of Christian spirituality, the noetic and the heart-centered strand, are not mutually exclusive but overlap and complement each other.⁹³

⁹⁰ Špidlík (1986), p. 19.

⁹¹ Špidlík (1986), pp. 20-21.

⁹² Špidlík (1986), p. 20.

⁹³ McGuckin (2001), pp. 56-57; Ware (1986), p. 160.

Since both researchers base their argument largely on the meaning of the terms *nous* and *kardia*, a brief look at these terms and their compatibility will be helpful.

Origen and his followers—Evagrius being one of his most loyal disciples—drew largely on Christianity's Greek intellectual background to describe the higher aspect of the soul, the mind or intellect, which they referred to as the *nous*. In its pre-fallen state, the *nous* constituted the entire soul (and not just its higher aspect), and it contemplated God ceaselessly through the Word, the Logos. Origen and Evagrius point to the *nous* as the human faculty that preserved its kinship to the immaterial, divine realm after the fall and, given this kinship, is the means by which the soul ascends back into the presence of God. Here, it reexperiences the blissful existence it knew in its original, uncorrupted state.

For Origen, the Logos, the Creator of the *nous*, is the source of this divine-human kinship.⁹⁴ Guided by the Platonic axiom that only like can know like, he suggests that the Logos, the Image of God, created the *nous* in its own image and, by doing so, provided human beings with a means of refashioning themselves after their divine model. According to Origenian anthropological teaching, this image of the Logos in the highest part of the human soul is never lost, even if it is covered by many layers of ignorance and sin. Indeed, assimilation to the divine model is always possible, provided Christians commit to the mystical life and the relentless pursuit of purification, illumination, and perfection. By engaging in this dynamic process, the inner image can gradually be freed of tarnish and attain its original likeness to the Logos. Origen proposes that the attainment of perfect likeness coincides with full knowledge of the Son and, through the Son, with

⁹⁴ The following brief discussion derives largely from Henri Crouzel, *Origen* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), pp. 87-119.

full knowledge of God. By cleansing the divine image, the *nous* is able to come face to face with God and to experience a light-filled deifying union.

Unlike adherents of the noetic current, theologians of the Syrian tradition, of which Macarius is the chief representative, commonly resorted to the term *kardia* to describe the human faculty by means of which an encounter with God is made possible.⁹⁵ Instead of envisioning divine-human communion in terms of a noetic ascent and an escape from the confinements of earthly matter, members of this strand advocated a descent into the human heart. Spiritual guides encouraged their disciples to enter deep into this inner region and to explore its terrain with persistence and care. Initially, this exploration brought to the surface much that was dark, distorted, and opposed to the ways of God. Yet if religious seekers persevered in their quest for God and were ever-vigilant to uproot the prompting of demons in their hearts, they could uncover the Kingdom of Heaven that lay hidden within themselves. They could discern God's movement in the heart and enter into lasting relations with Divinity.

With this brief elucidation in mind, the question arises if the two terms *nous* and *kardia* do indeed speak of two distinct human faculties as has frequently been suggested. Or are they perhaps comparable, seeking to describe, each in its own way, a person's deepest layer of being and seat of spiritual intelligence? Do not both terms point to that part of human nature with which it is possible to transcend the human realm and touch upon God? Ware and McGuckin suggest as much.

According to Ware, Evagrius used the term *nous* not only to designate "the reasoning brain but also, and more fundamentally, the apprehension of spiritual truth

⁹⁵ Helpful introductions to Macarius's mystical doctrine are provided by Maloney (1982), pp. 11-20; Simon Tugwell, "Evagrius and Macarius," in Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold (1986), pp. 173-175; idem, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1985), pp. 47-58.

through direct, non-discursive insight.”⁹⁶ Macarius, he resumes, “understood by the heart not merely the emotions and affections but the deep centre of the human person.”⁹⁷ If Evagrius is to be termed an “intellectualist,” it should be recognized that the word is employed in a sense quite different from its current usage. It is equally important to correctly understand the early Christian conception of *kardia* and to realize that it seeks to capture the place where a person is most authentically in the image of God.⁹⁸

McGuckin presents a similar argument. While acknowledging the value of contrasting the two dominant themes of noetic and heart-centered mysticism to explore the roots of the Byzantine spiritual tradition, he suggests that this approach is nevertheless an oversimplification that does not take into consideration exactly how much interconnectedness there is between the two expressions of early Christian mystical thought.⁹⁹

In support of his argument, McGuckin looks beyond the noetic teaching of the early church to Greek philosophy and suggests that even ancient thinkers, despite their reliance on the concept of the *nous* to designate a person’s truest reality, did not dismiss the notion of the heart out of hand.¹⁰⁰ While Plato never abandoned the basic physiological concept of the heart, he occasionally ascribed to it functions of the soul. The Stoic philosopher Chrysippos and his disciple Diogenes of Babylon pointed to the heart as the central organ of intellectual life, the seat of reason, from which feeling, willing, and thinking proceed, even if they did not go so far as to identify the process of

⁹⁶ Ware (1986), p. 160.

⁹⁷ Ware (1986), p. 160.

⁹⁸ Ware (1997b) pp. 400-401.

⁹⁹ McGuckin (2001), pp. 56-57.

¹⁰⁰ McGuckin (1999), pp. 70-71.

thought with the heart.¹⁰¹ McGuckin comments further on the compatibility of both terms by considering the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Jewish scriptures, and by noting that its authors frequently used *kardia* interchangeably with the terms *nous*, *psyche*, *dianoia*, and *pneuma*.¹⁰² For these authors, as for early Christian theologians, the heart was synonymous with the intellect, soul, mind, and spirit. The stringent distinction between human faculties was foreign to them, and the deepest layer of a person's existence could be indicated by a variety of names.

McGuckin's argument that Greek philosophy itself does not propose the fixed categorization of the intellectual and emotive faculties is confirmed by the observation that even Plato, the great speculative thinker, was not a mere theorist but always strove to acquire a direct, felt sense of the divine Mind. Like later Christian theologians, the Greek philosopher did not distinguish between the sphere of the mind on the one hand and the sphere of direct, visceral experience on the other hand. Instead, he strove to preserve their fundamental unity by leading his daily life in accordance with philosophical precepts.¹⁰³ Stoic philosophers followed his example. They, too, acknowledged the inherent connection between intellectual speculation and tangible, inner awareness and honored this tie by conducting their everyday affairs in a "philosophical" manner.¹⁰⁴

For the time being, these comments may suffice to suggest the compatibility of the two terms and the futility of relegating them to distinct spheres of existence, the one to the realm of the intellect and the other to the realm of the intuitive, experiential life. Hopefully, they have indicated that noetic and Syrian theologians had the same interest at

¹⁰¹ J. Behm, "καρδία Among the Greeks," *TDNT* 3.608-609, cited in McGuckin (1999), p. 70.

¹⁰² J. Behm, "The LXX, and Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism," *TDNT* 3.609-610, cited in McGuckin (1999), p. 70.

¹⁰³ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), pp. 260-261.

¹⁰⁴ Hadot (1995), pp. 58-59.

heart, even if they articulated their teaching in a variety of ways and set different priorities. Adherents of both currents of mystical thought hoped to describe the sacred inner region where the divine-human encounter takes place. Noetic and Syrian ascetics alike wished to indicate how religious seekers might immerse themselves in the silence that reveals God's inner presence. They agreed that a life based on the daily discipline of prayer, asceticism, fraternal charity, and service alone prepares human beings for this experience.¹⁰⁵ By heeding such a life and pursuing inner purification, illumination, and perfection, representatives of both legacies believed humans capable of transformation and of lasting participation in divine life.

The research of Ware and McGuckin features prominently in the above discussion, and it continues to do so throughout the study. Valuable contributions to a deeper understanding of the doctrine of inner prayer have also been made by Hausherr, Maloney, Špidlík, Brock, and Golitzin. All of these authors are intimately acquainted with the mystical teachings of late antiquity and have spent many years studying the tradition of the prayer of the heart. In each instance, their research allows us to discern the extent to which this ancient tradition is characterized by its biblical roots, the incarnational spirit by which it is guided, and the value it ascribes to humanity's embodied existence.

Hausherr paid close attention to the idea of prayer as a continual state of being and as a way of life inviting greater intimacy with God.¹⁰⁶ In his classic study on the Jesus Prayer, *The Name of Jesus*, in which he inquires into the early Christian usage of the messianic name, Hausherr pays tribute to the biblical and incarnational context of

¹⁰⁵ Tugwell (1986), p. 169.

¹⁰⁶ Hausherr (1978), pp. 119-189.

Christianity's mystical legacy by commenting on the fervor with which ascetics called upon the name of Jesus, hoping thereby to invoke the presence of their Savior and the grace that was bestowed upon them at the incarnation. Their devotion to the name of the Lord, Hausherr suggests, reflects a deep belief in the importance of God's salvific embodiment and its deifying effect on human nature. For early Christians, the heartfelt, continual invocation of the holy name established the closest of relations with Christ, who came to belong to them as they belonged to him.¹⁰⁷ It allowed for their sanctifying union with God and the glorification of their minds as well as bodies.

Hausherr does not exclude Origen from his discussion, one indication that he does not insist on his proposed distinction between the intellectual and the affective strands of Christianity's mystical heritage. He suggests that Origen, like theologians whose teaching is rooted in the emotive, experiential encounter with God, displays a profound commitment to the messianic name and infuses his teaching with a deep tenderness for Christ. According to Hausherr, Origen's habit of adding to the different names of Christ the possessive adjective 'my' suggests his burning, physical love for God, a love Origen feels in his flesh and bones, and an acute theological sensitivity to people's ability of perceiving Christ's inner presence experientially.¹⁰⁸

Hausherr sheds further light on the debt of early Christian asceticism to incarnational theology by exploring the motives that propelled members of the ancient church to engage in the mystical life. He is emphatic that ascetics did not flock to the desert to immolate themselves for the glory of God. They did not seek a life of misery. Rather, they longed to attain "a state of total interior integration and wholeness which is

¹⁰⁷ Hausherr (1978), p. 25.

¹⁰⁸ Hausherr (1978), pp. 21-26.

literally health or salvation (*soteria*), the well-being and joy that comes from living for the greater honor and glory of one's maker."¹⁰⁹ If early Christians embraced the rigors of this life, they did so in the hope of entering a state of true prayer which "is completely peaceful and restful even for the body."¹¹⁰ Their objective was not to bring about a state of mental and physical exertion.

Špidlík adopts a very similar approach. Like Hausherr, he points to the inherently experiential nature of the mystical life and the value its practitioners attributed to material existence. Even ascetics who adhered to a more intellectualized spirituality did not situate the experience of the divine in the realm of reason alone but realized that even the most exalted thoughts did not allow for direct contact with God.¹¹¹ While Špidlík does not call into question the dualistic tendencies inherent in Christian anthropology, he points to the mysteries of creation, of the incarnation, and of the resurrection to indicate the positive stance the early church adopted toward humanity's embodied existence.¹¹² As further proof of this early Christian sentiment, Špidlík points to Paul and his belief in the body's higher dignity. He singles out the First Letter to the Corinthians (6:14-20) in which the apostle posits the body's ability to be raised like the Savior, to become a member of the body of Christ, to be transformed into the temple of the Holy Spirit, and to serve as an important means of glorifying God.¹¹³

Špidlík pays careful attention to Christianity's biblical anthropological heritage and heeds its teaching on the heart as the principle of human integration and as God's

¹⁰⁹ Hausherr (1978), p. 124.

¹¹⁰ Hausherr (1978), p. 141.

¹¹¹ Špidlík (1986), pp. 19-20.

¹¹² Špidlík (1986), pp. 108-111.

¹¹³ Špidlík (1986), p. 108.

dwelling place.¹¹⁴ The heart, he proposes, is the seat of total, intuitive understanding. It is the human faculty by means of which the Creator is united to all of creation. Its natural desires are noble and representative of a person's longing for the good, the just, and the beautiful.¹¹⁵ Špidlík's inquiry into the biblical conception of the heart tells us much about the early Christian understanding of the mystical quest and allows us to see how prominent a place members of the ancient church attributed to embodied existence throughout this quest.

Maloney largely follows this line of arguments. Like Špidlík, he points to the heart as the principle of unity within a person and suggests that "it is in our 'heart' that we meet God in an I-Thou relationship."¹¹⁶ Here, humans become aware of the divine presence until they can literally feel God.¹¹⁷ Maloney echoes Hausherr and Špidlík by commenting on the dignity with which members of the ancient church endowed the body. Early Christians taught that the whole human being has been created in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:26); the whole person, including the body, is an image of Divinity: "The body is a material 'place' or *locus* where God's transfiguring light is shining through and divinizing the whole person in the process."¹¹⁸ Maloney further points to the early Christian belief that everything material "can be a 'diaphanous' point of encountering the inner, transforming energies of divine love, bringing all things into Jesus Christ."¹¹⁹

Regardless of his tendency to distinguish rather sharply between the two currents of early Christian spirituality, Maloney concedes that even adherents of the noetic mystical strand never settled for mere intellectualism. Origen as well as Evagrius knew

¹¹⁴ Špidlík (1986), p. 105.

¹¹⁵ Špidlík (1986), pp. 106-107.

¹¹⁶ Maloney (1981), p. 24.

¹¹⁷ Maloney (1981), p. 26.

¹¹⁸ Maloney (1981), p. 180.

¹¹⁹ Maloney (1981), p. 180.

that the quest for God was a matter of truly knowing, possessing, and seeing God.¹²⁰ Like so many early Christians, they were deeply aware that the intuitive discernment of God's presence was the only means of bringing all things into Christ and of insuring that the incarnate Logos, the true Life who dwells within believers, would divinize the latter into living members of his own body.¹²¹ Maloney's discussion of the incarnation and the sway it held over ascetics is a valuable resource and, like the work of Hausherr and Špidlík, emphasizes the degree to which incarnational theology informed the early Christian understanding of humanity's embodied existence.

Ware's contributions to the topic at hand are considerable indeed. As one of the translator-editors of *The Philokalia*, he has been instrumental in disseminating valuable early Christian primary sources among the English-speaking Christian West and in refamiliarizing it with its forgotten mystical heritage. Equally valuable have been his many publications on a large number of topics concerning this heritage.¹²² Like the above authors, Ware points to biblical anthropology and its close link to the prayer of the heart. He, too, pays special attention to the early Christian understanding of the heart as a person's truest self and the point of self-transcendence "where the physical and non-material, the created and the uncreated converge."¹²³ Through the heart, divine grace permeates a person's entire being, transforming not only the soul but all parts of the body. Ware pays close attention to the early Christian idea that embodied existence is an important means of mystical ascent and that there can be no salvation for the soul apart from the body. Divinization signifies the transformation of the total person and Christians

¹²⁰ Maloney (1992), p. 2.

¹²¹ Maloney (1981), p. 128.

¹²² See, for instance, Kallistos Ware, *The Power of the Name* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG, 1974); idem (1986); idem (1997b); idem, *Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 75-110.

¹²³ Kallistos Ware, "Preface," pp. xi-xviii, in Maloney (1992), p. xvi.

fulfill their God-given potential not by saving their souls but rather by becoming spirits enfleshed.¹²⁴

To highlight the holistic, Christocentric approach of the prayer of the heart tradition, Ware, too, comments on the power of invoking the name of Jesus, of standing in the immediate presence of the Savior, and of establishing a deep, personal relationship with God incarnate.¹²⁵ He links Christ's transfiguration to the possibility of our own transfiguration and suggests the body's ability to experience the final restoration of its original glory.¹²⁶ Aware that contemporary Christians are "finding it less and less helpful to distinguish sharply between mind and matter, between soul and body," Ware is greatly concerned to impress upon readers the present-day applicability of ancient mystical teaching and the benefits they may reap from it.¹²⁷ He cautions readers not to sever the past from the present and to neglect Christianity's valuable heritage. Like body and soul, heart and mind and, indeed, like the affective and the noetic strands of Christian mystical thought, past and present complement one another and constitute an integral whole. We will return to this point in upcoming chapters.

While this study is greatly informed by the pioneering work of the above mentioned scholars, it is most indebted to the research of three particular scholars, Sebastian Brock, Alexander Golitzin, and John McGuckin. Sebastian Brock, the renowned scholar of Syriac studies and translator of numerous ancient Syriac texts, has been instrumental in shedding light on the rich mystical teaching of Oriental

¹²⁴ Ware (1992), p. xiv.

¹²⁵ Ware (1974), pp. 10-11; idem (2000), p. 101.

¹²⁶ Ware (1992), pp. xiv-xv.

¹²⁷ Ware (1992), p. xiv.

Christianity.¹²⁸ In his discussion of Syrian ascetics, such as Aphrahat, Ephrem of Nisibis, and Isaac of Nineveh, Brock has paid special attention to their Semitic heritage, to their reliance on holistic biblical anthropology, and to their shared understanding of the heart as the spiritual center of a human being. This detailed discussion is invaluable to the present investigation, as are Brock's observations on the ways in which Syrian practitioners of inner prayer envisioned the gradual transformation of the human heart into God's temple. Of interest, too, is his emphasis on the close association of the heart, silent prayer, and the inner celebration of the liturgy. A careful examination of this association in upcoming chapters will deepen our understanding of how the tradition of the prayer of the heart is inherently relational and world-affirming in nature.

Like Brock, Alexander Golitzin has inquired carefully into the Semitic roots of early Christian mystical thought and is a valuable resource in coming to understand the beginnings of the prayer of the heart.¹²⁹ Golitzin has published widely on the reconceptualization of the biblical glory tradition in early Christian ascetical writings, a topic that is central to the exploration of the present topic. Following Brock in focusing first and foremost on early Syrian Christianity (while going on to consider its impact on later Byzantine spirituality), Golitzin suggests that many prominent Syrian ascetical writers reinterpreted biblical ascension and vision motifs, most notably the temple motif, and proposed the interiorization of these motifs. In their hands, the human heart is transformed into the new sanctuary in which Christ, the radiant throne of Glory, reveals himself to the human soul. For Golitzin, the Eastern Christian notion of deification, which

¹²⁸ Of particular interest for the purpose of this study are Sebastian Brock, "The Prayer of the Heart in Syriac Tradition," in *Sobornost* 4.2 (1982), pp. 131-142; idem (1987).

¹²⁹ See, for instance, Alexander Golitzin, "Et Introibo ad Altare Dei: The Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagite," in *Analekta Vlatadon* 59 (1994), pp. 334-340; idem, "A Testimony to Christianity as Transfiguration: The Macarian Homilies and Orthodox Spirituality," pp. 129-156, in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, ed. S.T. Kimbrough (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

is so central to the doctrine of the prayer of the heart, is closely associated with the biblical temple and tabernacle tradition. This observation is of considerable interest and invites further discussion on the process of deification and the degree to which the body, God's temple, participates in this process.

Equally indispensable to tracing the biblical roots of the prayer of the heart and exploring its holistic approach is the work of John McGuckin.¹³⁰ McGuckin has considered these features not only within a Syrian Christian context, but has added to this discussion a close reading of the noetic tradition of Origen and his followers. While McGuckin is ever aware of the influence that Greek philosophy exerted over early Christian thought and over the Origenian school of thought, in particular, he nevertheless emphasizes that even highly speculative thinkers, such as Origen and Evagrius, never abandoned Christianity's biblical heritage but remained faithful to its fundamental tradition of the enfleshment of the Logos within history as a paradigm for all human salvation.¹³¹ He suggests that, by doing so, Origenian theologians insured that their ascetical doctrine, despite its lingering influence of the concept of the noetic escape from matter, retained a strong sense of embodied Jesus mysticism, a sense they bequeathed to the tradition of the prayer of the heart.

McGuckin's discussion of this subject matter does not end here. He points to the benefits practitioners of inner prayer reaped from the philosophical training of noetic thinkers by commenting on Origen's and Evagrius's ability to provide future Christian ascetics with a technical vocabulary on which to base their anthropological and mystical

¹³⁰ McGuckin (1999); idem (2001); idem (2002).

¹³¹ McGuckin (1999), pp. 73-74.

doctrine.¹³² For the first time, spiritual guides could draw on a system that allowed them to differentiate between various human faculties and to explore their intrapsychic landscape with care and precision. It became possible to distinguish between the three dimensions of human existence, *nous*, *psyche*, and *soma*, and to elucidate how their respective modes of perception allowed for the discernment of God's inner presence. Henceforth, ascetics could trace the complex processes by means of which the heart might be purified and transformed into a divine temple. In the respect, more speculative theologians contributed to the shaping of a mystical doctrine that bore all the marks of holistic biblical anthropology and that was nuanced enough to allow for the in-depth exploration of a person's most sacred inner dimension.

While the upcoming discussions of early Christian theologians rely on a greater body of contemporary research than has been indicated in the above historiographical overview, the writings of Brock, Golitzin, and McGuckin provide the backbone of this study. By building on their research and examining the impact of Hebraic teaching on the Syrian and Origenian traditions as well as by considering the debt of the latter tradition to Greek concepts, this study attempts to show that the two currents of early Christian mystical thought are inherently compatible and complement rather than negate one another. While the two traditions vary in the degree and the means by which they draw on biblical anthropology, both look to this teaching as a means of articulating a doctrine that validates the embodied, communal nature of Christian existence. The Syrian tradition

¹³² This feature can be observed in many instances, especially in the writings of later Byzantine mystical teachers. For one specific example see John Anthony McGuckin, "The Shaping of the Soul's Perceptions in the Byzantine Ascetic Elias Ekdikos," in *The Body-Soul Problem in Byzantine Thought*, ed. J. Matula (Olomouc: Palacky University, forthcoming).

conveys this sentiment by looking to the created order and to God's self-manifestation therein.¹³³ It focuses on the sacramental life of the church which reflects so powerfully the belief that matter can show forth the glory of God. Poetry, imagery, symbol, and paradox are its preferred means of articulating this world-affirming stance.¹³⁴

Yet the writings of noetic theologians are no less poetic and vivid. Nor do they fail to display a profound belief in Christ's salvific enfleshment and in the goodness of the created order. Unlike early Syrian writings, they are, however, marked to a greater degree by Greek cosmology and anthropology. Far from being a disadvantage and calling into question the incarnational spirit of their mystical doctrine, this feature allows for the careful articulation of a holistic teaching on inner prayer that describes in great detail and with much practical insight how the gradual transformation of the human heart might be effected. Rather than tainting the Christian message with abstract and potentially dualistic philosophical constructs, the Greek learnedness of Origenian theologians brought a new degree of clarity and subtlety to the more affective, fluid approach of the Syrian tradition. The refined vocabulary of the noetic mystical strand complemented and enhanced the heart-centered approach rather than create a rift between both legacies.

The progressive intermarriage of the Hellenic Christian and the Syrian Christian mystical traditions brought forth a unique teaching on inner prayer that was deeply experiential in nature while simultaneously endowed with a substantial anthropological underpinning. It provided ascetics of the ancient church with a carefully articulated doctrine that suggested how the encounter with God in the human heart might be brought about. The gradual fusion of both traditions showed Christians how a holistic conception

¹³³ Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem the Syrian* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publication, 1985), pp. 27-29.

¹³⁴ Brock (1987), p. xi.

of human nature might allow for the progressive reintegration of inner faculties. It showed them that a person's deepest self could be transformed into a divine dwelling-place and radiate with the glory of God.

With the above introductory and historiographical comments in mind, we can now delve into the main body of the study. Let us do so by exploring first the biblical anthropological roots of the prayer of the heart tradition. To do so in as informed a manner as possible, a chapter on Old Testament anthropology and on the New Testament theology of the heart will be provided. Since the earliest literature of the Syrian church expresses Christianity's holistic scriptural heritage with particular force, the opening chapter on the biblical teaching of the heart will be followed by an inquiry into the works of two prominent fourth century Syrian ascetics, Aphrahat and Ephrem. The elucidation of their mystical doctrine will be followed by an examination of the teaching of Macarius, another great Syrian teacher of the ascetical life. While Macarius composed in Greek rather than Syriac, his influential homilies continue to reflect a deeply biblical understanding of the heart and provide valuable insight into the inherently holistic nature of early Christian mystical thought.

Once the Syrian background to the prayer of the heart tradition has been explored in the third chapter, we will consider its Greek Christian background in the fourth chapter. We will open this discussion with an examination of Origen's ascetical doctrine. Given its lasting impact on the Christian mystical tradition, the careful exploration of this doctrine and its debt to biblical teaching promises to shed further light on the Semitic roots of Christianity's lost heritage. Simultaneously, it will enable us to see in which instances Origen draws on Greek philosophy to refine scriptural teaching. The second prominent

theologian to be considered in this chapter is Evagrius. Special emphasis will be placed on Evagrius's ability to apply Origen's insights to the practical life and to forge a technical vocabulary that allows for the detailed exploration of the soul's progressive assimilation to God.

With the intention of showing how elements of the two strands of Christianity's mystical heritage were joined by subsequent theologians, the fifth chapter of this study is dedicated to the early Byzantine synthesis of these two strands. It opens with a discussion of the writings by Dionysius the Areopagite, a sixth century Syrian theologian who, despite his background, was intimately acquainted with the noetic tradition of ancient Alexandria. Since the seventh century theologian Maximus the Confessor exemplifies the intermarriage of earlier ascetical teachings, the discussion of his writings will conclude the chapter. To allow for as comprehensive a discussion of the prayer of the heart as possible, the subsequent chapter will provide a brief elucidation of the Egyptian desert tradition and the Byzantine hesychast tradition. A summarizing overview of the study's salient findings will be provided at the outset of the conclusion.

This study opened with the observation that an increasing number of contemporary Christians long for an inner encounter with God yet do not receive sufficient spiritual guidance from their churches to satisfy this longing. The study will conclude with the suggestion that the doctrine of the prayer of the heart is uniquely suited to address this need and to ease some of the restlessness experienced by modern religious seekers. Much speaks in favor of the reintroduction of this ancient practice to the teaching of today's churches: its nuanced reading of human consciousness, its body-centered, practical approach to the Christian life, and, closely linked to the previous point, its insistence that the quest for God is inherently communal and presupposes relations with

the neighbor and with the world at large. All of these aspects promise to strike a chord with modern individuals who are at home in a world in which the quest for inner healing increasingly focuses on the study of somatic awareness and relational systems. Thus, suggestions will be made as to how the mystical doctrine of the early church might be translated into a present-day context and allow contemporary Christians to benefit from its powerful teaching on inner transformation.

CHAPTER 2

The Biblical Background to the Prayer of the Heart

The Old Testament

Biblical anthropology endows the heart with tremendous importance, and the frequent usage of the noun *lēb/lēbāb* in the Old Testament—the term is employed 853 times in Hebrew and 8 times in Aramaic—attests to this popularity.¹³⁵ While the present-day understanding of the term may lead a modern audience astray and cause it to assume that *lēb* refers to the physical heart, it is helpful to bear in mind that this is seldom the case in biblical lore. The Old Testament rarely employs the term to designate this central organ, and if reference to human anatomy is occasionally made, *lēb* is likely to denote the chest area in general.¹³⁶

What, then, is the primary biblical usage of the term? Which human part or aspect does it seek to describe? According to Old Testament anthropology, the word *lēb* refers to the fundamental nature of a person and is linked to the entire spectrum of human existence, the vital, affective, noetic, voluntative, and spiritual.¹³⁷ Of these categories, only the concept of the heart as a person's vital center addresses the physical dimension of an individual to some degree, a reading that is captured in the verse

¹³⁵ H. J. Fabry, "*lēb/lēbāb*," *TDOT* 7.407; F. Baumgärtel, "*καρδία* in the OT," *TDNT* 3.606. Wolff suggests that *lēb/lēbāb* is the most important word in the vocabulary of Old Testament anthropology. See Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 40.

¹³⁶ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.411. Johnson indicates that the ancient Israelites were not aware of the heart's physiological importance and its vital function of circulating blood. See Aubrey R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the Thought of Ancient Israel* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), pp. 75-76.

¹³⁷ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.412.

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. (Prv 4:23)¹³⁸

Another rare instance in which the heart's physical aspect is taken into consideration and its source as a person's vital energy is made explicit can be observed in the following verse:

My heart throbs, my strength fails me; as for the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me. (Ps 38:10)

In this instance, the heart is presented as the place where sickness manifests itself most overtly.¹³⁹ Occasionally, a link between the heart and vitality may be suggested, even if the former is viewed primarily as a person's affective center:

A tranquil *lēb* gives life to the flesh. (Prv 14:30)

As a rule, however, the reader is more likely to find straightforward references to the heart as the seat of emotion.¹⁴⁰ In the *lēb*, the entire spectrum of human feelings is rooted, from sadness to joy, from worry to hope, from fear to boldness:¹⁴¹

Even in laughter the heart is sad, and the end of joy is grief. (Prv 14:13)

Anxiety weighs down the human heart, but good word cheers it up. (Prv 12:25)

At this also my heart trembles, and leaps out of its place. (Job 37:1)

Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord. (Ps 31:24)

Contemporary readers, who are used to associating the heart with human emotion, are likely to take this association for granted. Ancient Israelites, however, did not establish such a connection as a matter of course. For them, the term pointed, first and foremost, to a person's intellectual function.¹⁴² The heart designated an individual's

¹³⁸ Unless indicated, quotes are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

¹³⁹ Wolff (1974), p. 42.

¹⁴⁰ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.414.

¹⁴¹ Jan G. Bovenmars, *A Biblical Spirituality of the Heart* (New York: Alba House, 1991), pp. 20-24.

¹⁴² Wolff (1974), p. 46.

ability to reason and understand. If the *lēb* lacked insight and perception, it failed to fulfill its primary purpose. The close link between the heart and the capacity for noetic apprehension is conveyed in numerous biblical passages, many of which can be found in the wisdom literature. The following selection of citations may serve as a sample:

My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you, making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding . . . then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. (Prv 2:1-2, 5).

He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength—who has resisted him, and succeeded? (Job 9:4)

The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of a fool to the left. (Eccl 10:2)

An intelligent *lēb* acquires knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge. (Prv 18:15)

All of these passages suggest an interpretation of *lēb* in terms of a person's noetic center. The heart perceives. People gain insight and wisdom by listening with their heart. The idea that ancient Israelites thought of the heart as destined for understanding in much the same way that ears are destined for hearing is made explicit in the first and last of the above citations. A discerning heart is open and capable of receptive hearing.¹⁴³ It is ever attentive. If the heart listens closely, it is able to hear the coming of the Bridegroom (Song 5:2); it becomes the perfect vessel with which to perceive and convey the words of God (Ez 3:10-11). This aspect bears keeping in mind, for, like their Jewish ancestors, early Christians aspired to a heart that is ever awake and receptive. They, too, suggested that the heart's inner senses, including its sense of hearing, call for constant training and sharpening. The fine-tuning of these senses is an essential prerequisite for the apprehension of God and the progressive deepening of divine-human relations.

¹⁴³ Wolff (1974), p. 47.

Closely linked to the notion of the *lēb* as the noetic center of a human being is the concept of the heart as the seat of a person's voluntary activity. In the heart, the first stirrings of a desire can be perceived. Here, future wishes, intentions, and actions are formulated.¹⁴⁴ The heart provides the inner motivation for all deeds, whether spontaneous or premeditated. It is the governing factor of a person's will and behavior:

Do not desire her beauty in your heart, and do not let her capture you with her eyelashes. (Prv 6:25)

But this is not what he intends, nor does he have this in mind; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few. (Is 10:7)

Moses then called Bezalel and Oholiab and every skillful one to whom the Lord had given skill, everyone whose heart was stirred to come to do the work. (Ex 36:2)

Of particular interest for the purpose of this study is the importance biblical anthropology attributes to the heart as the core of a person's spiritual intelligence and as the seat of all religious sentiment. God's will and purpose are the reference point of all human feelings, thoughts, and actions:

I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts. (Jer 32:40)

You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. (Dt 11:18)

He did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the Lord. (2 Chr 12:14)

The idea that the deepest and truest reality of a person is rooted in the human heart and that this reality is defined by its relations with God is at the center of biblical anthropology. The concept of the heart cannot be discussed without commenting on a person's relationship with the divine because it is in the heart, the essential core of a person, that God's presence and influence are felt most directly. Here, Divinity impinges

¹⁴⁴ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.424-5; Johnson (1964), p. 79.

on human existence and reveals itself to humankind.¹⁴⁵ It is the place of the divine-human encounter. Deep as the sea (Ex 15:8; Ps 46:2), the heart provides direct access to God. By seeking the Lord with the heart (Ps 27:8), humans feel divine strength and grace pour into their being (Ps 19:14; 1 Sm 2:1-2).

The heart provides access to God only, however, if it is kept in a state of uprightness and purity, a state biblical sources commonly refer to in terms of a 'pure heart' or a 'heart of flesh.' What exactly characterizes a 'pure heart'? How are we to conceive of a 'heart of flesh'? Let us start out by considering the notion of the pure heart.

Ancient Israelites employed a variety of terms to suggest purity of heart and most commonly did so by drawing on the words *tāhōr* (clean), *bār* (pure), *yāšār* (straight), and *kibbēs* (cleanse).¹⁴⁶ All of these adjectives describe a heart that is upright, humble, and open; the pure heart is in a state of integrity, honesty, and perfection. People with pure hearts are morally as well as cultically clean and therefore permitted to participate in the offering of sacrifices.¹⁴⁷ They alone may worship and approach the Lord:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
Who do not lift up their souls to what is false,
And do not swear deceitfully. (Ps 24:3-4)

People with pure hearts may not only approach God but may enter into close relations with Divinity. To them, God offers comfort, guidance, and the riches of the heavenly sphere. The pure heart is infused with strength and joy, a gift no worldly goods

¹⁴⁵ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.427.

¹⁴⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the precise Hebrew terminology employed to designate the pure heart, see Irene Nowell, "The Concept of Purity of Heart in the Old Testament," pp. 17-29, in *Purity of the Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature: Essays in Honor of Juana Raasch*, ed. Harriet Luckman and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 19.

¹⁴⁷ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.430.

can match:

Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.

.....
When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.
Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Ps 73:1, 21-26)

The Hebraic notion that the heart is the place where God enters into direct contact with humankind and that it constitutes the vital link between the divine and the human realms is vividly expressed by the prevalent idea that Yahweh knows the heart of all (1 Kgs 8:39; 2 Chr 6:30; Ps 44:21; 139:23).¹⁴⁸ No feelings, thoughts, wishes, intentions, and plans of action arise in the heart without divine knowledge. God knows the heart's deepest secrets (Ps 33:15) and can incline it in any given direction and to any desired end. God can bow the heart (Ps 107:12), strengthen it (Ps 10:17), turn it toward good (Jer 32:39), or incline it toward evil (Ps 105:25).¹⁴⁹ Divine omnipotence can infuse the heart with a new spirit and bring it back to life:

I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them;
I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. (Ez 11:19; 36:26)

The last citation introduces us to the concept of the 'heart of flesh' and invites a brief elucidation of this expression. Ancient Israelites applied the concept in much the same way in which they applied the notion of the 'pure heart' and used it to designate a person's integrity, uprightness, and fervent desire to act in accordance with the will of God. Like the pure in heart, individuals with a new heart, a heart of flesh rather than a

¹⁴⁸ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.425.

¹⁴⁹ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.425.

heart of stone, are free from transgression, corruption, and self-interest. They lead their lives in accordance with the divine Law and are rewarded for their commitment by the gift of life:

Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me,
and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!
Why will you die, O house of Israel?
For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God.
Turn, then, and live. (Ez 18:31-32)

A heart of flesh is a heart that has been filled with a new spirit, God's own spirit, and that is fully alive. Having ceased to be guided by arrogance, obduracy, and selfishness, it longs to follow God's dictates rather than its own.¹⁵⁰ Like the pure heart, the heart of flesh is filled with remorse over past wrongdoings and places itself wholly in the hands of the Lord. It has been radically transformed and seeks divine favor by means of fasting, weeping, and mourning (Joel 2:12, 28). The biblical understanding that the transformation of the heart, while largely dependent on divine grace, calls for mourning (*penthos*), compunction (*katanyxis*), and ascetical effort is a prominent feature of much early Christian mystical literature. As we will see repeatedly in this study, members of the ancient church deemed no prayer as effective as prayer offered from a pure, repenting, and ever vigilant heart.

The idea that the heart has to be emptied of selfishness, stubbornness, and pride before it can receive God's life-giving spirit suggests that this inner region is not only God's dwelling-place but also the abode of vice. It indicates that the good as well as the bad arise deep within a person. If purity of heart allows for communion with Divinity, the

¹⁵⁰ The classical example of a person with a 'heart of stone' is Pharaoh, who, out of self-interest, sought to keep the Israelites as slaves and refused to listen to Moses and Aaron, and, hence, to God. See Bovenmars (1991), pp. 50-52.

wickedness of the *lēb* destroys relations with God and makes the divine-human encounter impossible.¹⁵¹

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. (Ps 66:18)

The beginning of human pride is to desert the Lord,
and to turn one's heart away from one's maker. (Sir 10:12 NJB)

Transgressing, and denying the Lord, and turning away from following our God,
talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart.
(Is 59:13)

The notion that God as well as God's foes reside in the heart is one further scriptural teaching that shapes early Christian mystical thought to a decisive degree and that will demand attention throughout this study. Like the biblical understanding of the heart as a person's essential core and as the place of the divine-human encounter, the idea of our deepest self as home to evil is presented in numerous early Christian writings. Ascetics of the ancient church were acutely aware of the many intricate maneuvers by means of which demons seek to corrupt the human heart and alienate it from God. Guided by this awareness, they gave careful thought to the question of how human beings might detect demonic scheming, diffuse its devastating impact, and prevent the heart's life-threatening estrangement from God. Like the ancient Israelites, ascetics of the early church were ever concerned to show by what means a sinful, lifeless heart might become receptive to the message of God and how, filled with remorse and compunction, it might be transformed into a place of theophany and heavenly splendor.

As will hopefully become increasingly apparent over the course of this study, the mystical tradition of the early church was deeply indebted to the holistic biblical

¹⁵¹ Fabry, *TDOT* 7.426; Bovenmars (1991), pp. 40-50.

conception of the human heart. For ancient Israelites as for many Christian ascetics, the heart was the seat of all human activity and, as such, the primary instrument of inner coherence and integration. In its original, ordered state, the heart was capable of bringing into accord a person's thoughts, feelings, wishes, and actions and of subordinating these to the will of God. The heart provided the vital link between the immaterial and the material realm, between God and the created order. In accordance with the holistic orientation of biblical anthropology, early Christians also proposed that the heart was the vital link between the body and the soul. By way of the heart, divine grace was believed to pour into every limb of the physical body and to sanctify mind as well as matter.¹⁵² If humans chose to cleanse their hearts by fasting, weeping, and mourning, they were able to transfigure the body as well as the soul into a place of divine indwelling. If Christians trained their heart to be ever vigilant and successfully guarded it against evil, they could come to discern God viscerally in their deepest self and know the riches of the heavenly Kingdom even in this lifetime.

To conclude this discussion of the Hebraic doctrine of the heart, it is helpful to raise one further point. It is worth bearing in mind that the line separating the concept of the heart and of the mind has always been fluid. In the introduction, it has already been suggested that Plato, Chrysippos, and Diogenes were wont to draw on both concepts to indicate a person's deep reality, even if they gave priority to the notion of the mind or *nous*. Attention has also been drawn to the Septuagint and its interchangeable use of the two terms. Although the translators of the Hebrew Bible most commonly translated *lēb* by its true Greek equivalent *kardia*, they occasionally resorted to expressions such as *psyche*

¹⁵² Ware (1992), p. xvi.

(soul), *dianoia* (understanding, intelligence, mind), *frenes* (thinking, understanding), *nous* (mind), or *stithos* (chest, breast) to render the term.¹⁵³

Many of these renderings appear in early Christian writings and, whenever they do, it is important to note that they do not suggest a discontinuation of the biblical tradition of the heart as a person's most profound reality. The notion of the heart as the unifying principle of body and soul, of the material and the immaterial, and of the created and uncreated, is at all times integral to the mystical thought of early Christianity. Time and again throughout the upcoming chapters, we will have occasion to observe the commitment of the early church to its biblical anthropological heritage and its willingness to embrace a conception of human nature profoundly holistic in approach.

Given the holistic orientation of the ancient church, we will also have ample opportunity to discuss the relevance of early Christian mystical thought for contemporary Christians who long to experience God viscerally and who hope to do so by looking beyond the heart-mind divide that characterizes so much of today's theological discourse. We will have occasion to examine a conception of human nature and of the divine-human encounter that promises to redress today's excessively intellectual orientation of the Christian message and to infuse the religious life of modern religious seekers with a more intimate, heart-felt sense of God. The brief discussion of the heart in the New Testament, which is to follow in the next section, will help us to take a first step in this direction. Let us examine the degree to which authors of the New Testament relied on Hebraic teaching to articulate their understanding of the encounter with God in the human heart and how this understanding provided the foundation of a mystical doctrine that heralds the deeply personal, visceral apprehension of God's inner presence.

¹⁵³ Baumgärtel, *TDNT* 3.610; Bauer, "Herz," *RAC* 14.1098.

The New Testament

In the New Testament, the tendency to view the heart as the very center of a person and as the seat of all affective, noetic, voluntative, and religious life is continued and taken to new heights.¹⁵⁴ Once again, the heart is the wellspring of every facet of human existence. In this inner region, emotions, thoughts, desires, wishes, and actions have their beginning:

So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (Jn 16:22)

He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" (Lk 24:38)

He has shown strength with his arm; He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. (Lk 1:51)

For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. (Rv 17:17)

Following in the footsteps of Hebrew prophets and patriarchs, the authors of the New Testament suggest that God has immediate access to the heart and can discern its many stirrings. The heart thus continues to serve as the inner arena where Divinity turns to human beings and reveals its will:¹⁵⁵

Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everybody's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." (Acts 1:24-25)

Also like their Jewish ancestors, the apostles indicate that God turns to humans

¹⁵⁴ J. Behm, *TDNT* 3.611.

¹⁵⁵ J. Behm, *TDNT* 3.611.

and grants divine closeness only if the heart has been adequately cleansed. The Semitic tradition according to which the heart has to be pure and made of flesh before it can perceive the presence of God remains an integral part of New Testament thought. The core of a person has to be empty of evil and receptive to the divine message if it is to serve as the point of contact between God and the individual. This teaching is beautifully conveyed in the words

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (Mt 5:8)

An important feature in texts of the New Testament, above all in the letters of Paul, and a feature we will encounter in many early Christian writings is the pronounced link the apostles establish between the heart and the interior, spiritual worship of God. This link is best explored, perhaps, by considering first the notion of faith and its deep impact on the heart. Peter suggests the following:

And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them [the Gentiles] by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. (Acts 15:8-9)

According to Peter, faith purifies the heart and initiates the process of conversion. By believing in the good news and embracing Christ as the Son of God, the heart is opened and able to receive divine teachings:

A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. (Acts 16:14)

As divine instruction takes root in the fertile ground of the heart and as the process of conversion blossoms, Christians hold and ponder God's teachings within themselves

and gradually learn to act upon them.¹⁵⁶ By embracing the virtuous life, they progressively deepen the heart's understanding of these teachings and become disciples of the Lord. The effect of this process is truly transformative:

But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom 10:8-9)

Faith softens the heart, inclines it toward God, and enables individuals to surrender to Christ and his message. This deep conversion, or *metanoia*, opens up the path to the Kingdom by allowing the Son of God to take up permanent residence in the heart and to fill it with his divine presence.¹⁵⁷ Paul suggests the following:

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. (Eph 3:16-17)

Through faith, Christ lives in the heart of the professed Christian (Gal 2:20-21). Once a market place, a person's deepest self becomes a temple, which radiates with the light of Divinity. Illuminated and strengthened by the inner presence of the Redeemer, Christians perceive the depth of God's love and find peace.¹⁵⁸

As suggested by Paul's words, the inner being of the professed Christian is not only the dwelling-place of Christ but is suffused also by the presence of the Spirit. The Spirit guides the process of renewal along the lines revealed by the Son and features prominently in the process of conversion. Through the inner workings of the Spirit, the heart is progressively strengthened and its receptivity to divine teachings increased. Paul points to the heart as the abode of the Holy Spirit on many occasions:

¹⁵⁶ Bovenmars (1991), p. 108.

¹⁵⁷ Bovenmars (1991), p. 105.

¹⁵⁸ Bovenmars (1991), p. 110.

But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment. (2 Cor 1:22)

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal 4:6-7)

Bearing in mind the above comments on the inherent link between the heart and faith and on the heart as the temple of Christ and the Spirit, let us now consider the close association of the heart with the spiritual worship of God. Once the heart has been renewed through faith and serves as a divine dwelling-place, the need for a physical temple structure where ritually pure worshippers offer animal sacrifices ceases to exist. The temple, the sacrificial rite, and the priestly office are no longer limited to the material realm but come to constitute an inner reality. The spiritual interpretation of the temple motif is suggested already in the Old Testament, and some of its authors were well aware of the fact that God calls for the sacrifice of a heart aware of its own sinfulness rather than for blood sacrifices.¹⁵⁹ However, it is only with the New Testament that the notion of

¹⁵⁹ Bovenmars (1991), p. 13. For relevant passages, see, for instance, Psalms 51:10, 16-17: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. . . . For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Other biblical verses that are of interest within this context are Psalms 140:2: "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice" and Malachi 1:11: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering." Gaillard discusses the spiritual conception of sacrifice in the Old Testament by drawing attention to Isaiah 57:15 and 66:1-2: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Is 57:15); "Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word" (Is 66:1-2). See Jean Gaillard, "Domus Dei," *DSp* 3.1554. Further examples in the Old Testament that suggest the spiritual interpretation of the temple motif include 1 Samuel 15:22: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams;" Hosea 6:6: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings;" Micah 6:6-8: "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? . . . He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly

spiritual worship moves into the foreground and finds its greatest expression in the writings of Paul:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom 12:1)

Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph 5:18-20)

The above words leave us in no doubt that, for Paul, the heart is the new spiritual temple. The faithful no longer depend on the Temple of Jerusalem to offer their sacrifice to God but have themselves become the sacrificial site.¹⁶⁰ Having purified their hearts through faith and having witnessed the renewal of their deepest selves through the ongoing guidance of Christ and the Spirit, they are transformed into perfect vessels of divine glorification. In their hearts, they are able to praise God at any time and in any place. They have the means of drawing uniquely close to Divinity and of feeling its presence pervade the deepest level of their being.

The New Testament teaching of the heart as God's spiritual temple is a vital aspect of early Christian mystical thought and shapes the tradition of the prayer of the heart to a large degree. Time and again, we will return to the discussion of this important teaching. We will see how the interiorization of the biblical temple motif allowed early Christians to establish direct, unmediated contact with Divinity and to discern God in the most intimate of ways. For members of the ancient church, the glorification of God by means of pure inner prayer was considered to be of such power as to introduce them to

with your God?"

¹⁶⁰ Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 1996), p. 52.

the heavenly realm and allow for their participation in the heavenly liturgy before the throne of God. The very personal, inner celebration of the liturgy went hand in hand with its celebration by the angels. It revealed to human existence the peace, hope, and love of the world to come.

Throughout this study, we will also have occasion to observe that the ability to participate, through inner prayer, in the angelic liturgy and to establish unmediated contact with Divinity did not call into question the external glorification of God. For members of the early church, commitment to inner prayer did not render void the importance of the church, its liturgy, and its communal setting. It did not divorce Christians from the reality of earthly, embodied existence. Despite their wish to interiorize the worship experience, early Christian theologians viewed the mystical life as firmly rooted in the here and now. If they called upon their audience to heed Paul's advice to make melody to the Lord in the heart, they did so with the understanding that the celebration of the interior liturgy, no less than the celebration of the external liturgy, called for the constant attempt to overcome discord and to be reconciled to fellow-beings. This sentiment is conveyed in many of the writings we are about to consider, and we will have ample opportunity to highlight the inherent link between inner prayer, communal existence, and active service throughout the upcoming inquiry.

Let us now turn our attention to the Syrian church, which is most directly linked to the Semitic world out of which Christianity sprang.¹⁶¹ As we do so, we will see that its teaching is deeply committed to the biblical tradition of the heart and to the reconceptualization of the temple motif in terms of an inner, spiritual reality. By considering salient passages, initially, from the writings of the Syrian ascetics Aphrahat

¹⁶¹ Brock (1987), p. x.

and Ephrem and, thereafter, from the *Macarian Homilies*, we will be able to observe how the notion of the heart as a place of inner worship and as God's earthly dwelling-place shaped the mystical teaching of early Christianity in a unique way. Based on this inquiry, we will also be able to observe how the ascetical doctrine of these prominent Syrian fathers might guide modern Christians toward greater intimacy with God without calling into question the value of embodied, communal day-to-day existence.

CHAPTER 3

The Syrian Christian Background to the Prayer of the Heart

Aphrahat

The Syrian Christian tradition, which constitutes a vital part of Oriental Christianity, has frequently been overlooked, attention having been given primarily to the Latin West and the Byzantine Greek East.¹⁶² This fact is lamentable indeed for the early Syrian church was in possession of a rich mystical tradition and the proud owner of a large set of valuable ascetical texts. Fortunately, this oversight has been redressed over the course of the past decades by prominent Syriac scholars, such as Sebastian Brock, Kathleen McVey, Robert Murray, David Miller, and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, who have translated ancient Syriac texts into English and presented studied commentaries on their content.¹⁶³ Hence, it is now possible to gain a deeper understanding of this much neglected tradition and to examine more closely the historical context that gave rise to this expression of early Christian mystical thought.

¹⁶² Brock (1987), p. x.

¹⁶³ See, for instance, Brock (1987). In this work, Brock provides a helpful general introduction to Syrian Christianity and its literature and presents excerpts from major early Christian mystical writings. For further translations see Sebastian Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem* (2nd enl. ed., San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1984); idem, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990); idem, *Bride of Light: Hymns of Mary from the Syriac Churches* (Kottayam: St. Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 1994); idem, *Isaac of Nineveh: Ascetical Homilies, 'the Second Part', Chapters IV-XLI* (Lovanii: in aedibus Peeters, 1995). Translations by Kathleen McVey include *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). For works by Robert Murray see, in particular, his *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). For works by Susan Ashbrook Harvey see Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Asceticism and Society in Crisis: John of Ephesus and the Lives of the Eastern Saints* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

Syriac was spoken by early Christians living in the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and in the Persian Empire, a region that today falls within the borders of south-east Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and western Iran.¹⁶⁴ Syriac is a Semitic language, a dialect of Aramaic, and is first known in pagan inscriptions of the first three centuries CE. With the translation of the Bible into Syriac, it became an important theological and liturgical language of large parts of Oriental Christianity. Syriac survives in late ancient to early medieval Christian texts and remains the liturgical language of a range of churches, primarily the three Oriental Orthodox churches (Maronite, Syrian Orthodox, Church of the East).¹⁶⁵

Given its close relationship to biblical Hebrew, it is little surprising that, in Syriac, the word for heart, *lebbâ*, has the same wide range of meaning that *lēb* has in the Old Testament.¹⁶⁶ Like biblical writings, Syriac texts point to the heart as the vital center of a human being; it is the source of life itself. The heart is the affective, noetic, voluntative, and spiritual core of a person and, as such, the seat of emotions, thoughts, and all endeavors concerning willing and planning. This wide range of meaning is beautifully demonstrated in the writings of two early Syrian ascetics, Aphrahat, the 'Persian sage,' and Ephrem of Nisibis. Their writings were conceived prior to 400, a period during which Syrian Christianity was still only barely hellenized, and the texts are therefore of great value as the only extant witnesses to a genuinely Semitic form of Christianity, virtually

¹⁶⁴ Sebastian Brock, "The Syriac Tradition," pp. 199-215, in Jones, Wainwright, and Jarnold (1986), p. 203.

¹⁶⁵ Brock (1986), p. 203. See also John F. Healy, "Syriac," pp. 466-67, in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity*, ed. K. Parry, D. J. Melling, D. Brody, S. H. Griffith, and J. F. Healy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 466.

¹⁶⁶ For a brief yet thorough discussion of this feature see Deirdre Ann Dempsey, "The Phrase 'Purity of Heart in Early Syriac Writings,'" pp. 31-44, in Luckman and Kulzer (1999), pp. 32-34.

untouched by Greek thought patterns.¹⁶⁷

Little is known of Aphrahat, the first major Syrian church father and ascetical writer whose work has survived. Aphrahat's approximate dates have to be surmised from extant writings as does any insight into the circumstances of his life. He appears to have flourished in the early fourth century (c. 270-345). A surviving synodical letter written by him to the bishops in Persia denouncing clerical abuses suggests that he held a high-ranking position in the Persian church and may have been a bishop.¹⁶⁸

Aphrahat was an ascetic who belonged to a movement called the 'Sons and Daughters of the Covenant.' Members of this movement, to whom the Persian sage refers as the *bnay qyāmā*, followed the native Syrian tradition of the consecrated life which was a forerunner of the main, Egyptian-inspired monasticism that spread into Syria as of the late fourth century.¹⁶⁹ The *bnay qyāmā* placed great emphasis on baptism, the decisive moment at which the soul was betrothed to Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom. Baptism marked the beginning of a life dedicated to the pursuit of virginity and holiness, a way of life ascetics chose in the hope of anticipating in this lifetime the splendor with which Adam had been endowed before the fall and which could be fully realized only at the resurrection.¹⁷⁰ With baptism, the *bnay qyāmā* or *ihīdāyē*, as Aphrahat also terms them (i.e. the followers of the 'Only-Begotten,' the *ihīdāyā*) were incorporated into the unity of

¹⁶⁷ Brock distinguishes between the Semitic and the Hellenic poles of Syrian Christianity yet points to a continuum between these two extremes. He suggests that "even a writer like Ephrem, one of our main witnesses to the Semitic pole, is certainly not free from the influence of Greek thought, but this influence affects, as it were, only the surface, and never the deep structures, of his thought patterns and mode of expression," see Brock (1987), p. xii.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Lavenant, "Aphraates," *EEC* 1.54; McGuckin (2004b), v.s. "Aphrahat," p. 19.

¹⁶⁹ Brock (1987), p. xxi. Brock uses the term 'proto-monasticism' to describe this tradition and indicates that its distinct features were absorbed into monasticism inspired by the Egyptian model over the course of the fifth century.

¹⁷⁰ Brock (1987), pp. xxi-xxv.

the body of Christ and acquired a new identity given 'in the Spirit.' This new identity allowed them to share in Christ's divine sonship and to conceive of God as their eternal 'Father.'¹⁷¹ Henceforth, they were able to transcend all divisions imposed by temporal existence and to meet fellow-beings as equals, regardless of their biological and social reality. Service to the neighbor was of the essence and, despite their commitment to a life of celibacy and interiority, members of the Covenant remained actively involved in the day-to-day affairs of the church, living in small informal groups amid larger Christian communities.¹⁷² Married *ihīdāyē* continued to live with their spouses, although they, too, led a life of abstinence.

Aphrahat's writings, his *Twenty-Three Demonstrations*, survive in their entirety. Devoid of standard Nicene doctrine,¹⁷³ 'systematic' thinking, or Greek philosophical teaching, they are steeped in Semitic teaching and bear the mark of "targumic traditions,"¹⁷⁴ handed down from the earliest Judaeo-Christian communities of Mesopotamia before the rupture between Church and Synagogue."¹⁷⁵ The first ten of Aphrahat's *Demonstrations* were composed in 337 as a set of dialogues for the guidance of fellow-ascetics. They address a variety of topics, including faith, love, fasting, prayer, the ascetical lifestyle, penance, and humility. *Demonstration* 6 is explicitly addressed to the 'Sons and Daughters of the Covenant' and provides the earliest reference to the

¹⁷¹ John D. Zizioulas, "The Early Christian Community," pp. 23-43, in McGinn, Meyendorff, Leclercq (1987), pp. 29-30.

¹⁷² Brock considers the nature of this lifestyle in Sebastian Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (Kerala, India: SEERI, 1989), p. 52; see also Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 329.

¹⁷³ The fact that Aphrahat shows no awareness of standard Nicene christology and trinitarian doctrine may be explained by the fact that Syria sent no delegates to Nicaea and remained largely unaware of the council's importance until late in the fourth century. Ephrem the Syrian was the first major theologian who tried, retrospectively, to bring the Syrian church in line with Nicene Orthodoxy. See Lavenant, *EEC* 1:54; Aphrahat, *Unterweisungen*, trans. and intr. Peter Bruns, vol. 1 (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1991), pp. 56-57.

¹⁷⁴ I.e. traditions that are based on the Aramaic oral paraphrases and translations of the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁷⁵ Lavenant, *EEC* 1:54.

movement.¹⁷⁶ The next twelve treatises were written between 343 and 345 and are mainly concerned with Jewish-Christian dialogue and Jewish objections to the church. The last *Demonstration* was composed in 345, at the start of Shapur II's persecution of Christians, and is an essay on biblical history and the end of times.

Of particular interest within the context of this study is *Demonstration 4* which is devoted to the topic of prayer. It is the first exposition on the subject that does not take as its starting-point the explication of the Lord's Prayer.¹⁷⁷ In the treatise, Aphrahat follows biblical lore and presents the heart as the spiritual center of a human being. He agrees with the authors of Scripture that the heart serves as God's temple, provided it has been sufficiently cleansed and has been reintroduced to its original, pristine state. Aphrahat impresses upon his audience the need for a pure heart from the very outset of the exposition:

Purity of heart constitutes prayer more than do all the prayers that are uttered out aloud, and silence united to a mind that is sincere is better than the loud voice of someone crying out. My beloved, give me now your heart and your thought, and hear about the power of pure prayer; see how our righteous forefathers excelled in their prayer before God, and how it served them as a pure offering.¹⁷⁸

For Aphrahat, prayer is an internalized sacrifice and any sacrifice presented to God has to be offered from an unblemished heart. By emphasizing prayer as a pure, spiritual offering and as greatly dependent on a worshipper's inner disposition, Aphrahat

¹⁷⁶ Dempsey (1999), p. 36.

¹⁷⁷ As is the case, for instance, with the well-known expositions on prayer by Origen and Tertullian. See Brock (1987), p. 2.

¹⁷⁸ Aphrahat, *Dem 4.1*, in Brock (1987), p. 5.

continues to align himself with biblical teaching and invites comparison with two Old Testament texts in particular, Malachi 1:11 and Psalms 140:2.¹⁷⁹

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering. (Mal 1:11)

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice. (Ps 140:2)

His doctrine on prayer as an interior offering invites even greater comparison with the prevalent New Testament teaching which looks to the pure heart and conscience of the faithful as God's true temple, a teaching that, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is captured succinctly by Paul's call to the Christians of Rome to present their bodies "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1).

Aphrahat resumes his fourth *Demonstration* by enumerating the many benefits that can be reaped from prayer offered from a pure heart. Once again, Semitic diction dominates his discourse:

Hear then, my beloved, about this pure prayer, and what powers have been manifest in it. . . . Our father Jacob too prayed at Bethel and saw the gate of heaven opened, with a ladder going up on high. . . . What then are we to say about the boundless power of Moses' prayer? For his prayer saved him from the hands of Pharaoh, and it showed him the Shekinah of his God. . . . Jonah also prayed before his God from the depths of the sea, and he was heard and answered, and was delivered without suffering any harm; for his prayer pierced the depths, conquered the waves and overpowered tempests; it pierced the cloud, flew through the air, opened the heavens, and approached the throne of majesty by means of Gabriel who brings prayers before God. As a result the depths vomited up the prophetic man, and the fish brought Jonah safely to dry land.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁹ For Aphrahat's debt to Malachi 1:11, see Brock (1987), p. 3; Dempsey (1999), p. 37; McGuckin (1999), p. 91, n. 60. For the link between Aphrahat and Psalms 140:2, see McGuckin (1999), p. 91, n. 60. The importance in early Christianity of prayer as a pure offering is discussed in R. P. C. Hanson, *Eucharistic Offering in the Early Church* (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove Books, 1979).

¹⁸⁰ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.4-8, in Brock (1987), pp. 8-12.

The above words allow us to see clearly that Aphrahat continues the biblical tradition according to which prayer is the quintessential means of establishing relations with God. By offering a prayer that arises from a heart empty of evil and receptive to the divine message, the gates of heaven may be opened and the Shekinah of God encountered. If the faithful follow Hannah's example (1 Sam 1:13) and, like her, call upon the Lord from their deepest and truest selves, their pure hearts, they, too, may hope to have their prayers heard and answered.¹⁸¹ Aphrahat reiterates his teaching on the heart as the locus of inner, silent worship and of the divine-human encounter in the following words:

Our Lord's words thus tell us 'pray in secret in your heart, and shut the door'. What is the door He says we must shut, if not your mouth? For here is the temple in which Christ dwells, just as the Apostle said: *You are the temple of the Lord* for Him to enter into your inner person, into this house, to cleanse it from everything that is unclean, while the door—that is to say, your mouth—is closed.¹⁸²

Aphrahat is greatly invested in the idea of the heart as a place of divine indwelling. For him, it is the temple of the Lord. If Christians engage in inner prayer, if they raise their heart upward, lower their eyes downward, if they enter inside the inner person and pray in secret to God,¹⁸³ they gradually transform the secret chamber of the heart into a pure, unblemished site and ready themselves for Christ's visitation. They cleanse their innermost self of evil and invite the heavenly Bridegroom to take up permanent residence in his earthly temple. Here he assists the worthy in their ongoing struggle for perfection.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.8, in Brock (1987), p. 11.

¹⁸² Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.10, in Brock (1987), p. 14.

¹⁸³ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.13, in Brock (1987), p. 17.

¹⁸⁴ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.10, in Brock (1987), p. 14; idem, *Dem* 6.8 (on the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant), in Bruns (1991), vol. 1, p. 197.

Aphrahat's conception of prayer as a pure, interior sacrifice offered in the heart is a prominent feature of his doctrine. As indicated by the above cited passages from the Book of Malachi and the Book of Psalms, a spiritual reading of the sacrificial rite, while fully developed only in the New Testament, is not absent from Old Testament texts. In a few instances, it is even linked specifically to the heart.¹⁸⁵ The spiritual conception of worship is explored also in the works of first century Jewish authors, amongst them Philo of Alexandria, who suggests that the only sacrifice worthy of God is the pure mind and soul offering itself to God.¹⁸⁶ Pre-Christian Jewish apocalyptic writings, such as the texts of the sectarian Jewish community at Qumran, likewise bear witness to the developing idea that the inner, spiritual temple rather than the physical temple allows for the encounter with God.¹⁸⁷

Yet regardless of the Jewish origins of this teaching, Christians believed themselves to be the ones who truly fulfilled God's call for the continuous offering of unblemished sacrifices.¹⁸⁸ Their offerings, they proposed, were preferable to those presented by pagans and Jews, for Christians alone fully met God's demand for a sacrifice that was offered with an upright heart and a good conscience. They alone presented their purified bodies as living sacrifices (1 Cor 6:19; Rom 12:1) and praised the Lord by engaging in kind, generous deeds (Heb 13:15-16).

We are in possession of a number of early Christian texts that expound the idea that purity of heart is essential if an offering is to be acceptable to God, two important sources with which Aphrahat is likely to have been familiar being the *Odes of Solomon*, a

¹⁸⁵ See, for instance, Sirach 39:5 of the Syriac Bible; as quoted in Brock (1987), p. xxvi.

¹⁸⁶ Bradshaw (1996), p. 51.

¹⁸⁷ Bradshaw (1996), p. 51; Alexander Golitzin, "Temple and Throne of the Divine Glory," pp. 107-129, in Luckman and Kulzer (1999), p. 117.

¹⁸⁸ Hanson (1979), pp. 3-4.

document written originally in Syriac and dated to the second century, and the *Didache*, a book on church discipline believed to have originated in Syria in the late first to mid-second century.¹⁸⁹ Indications of a 'pure offering' doctrine are also found in the second century Greek document *The Shepherd of Hermas* and in a passage from the Greek *Epistle of Barnabas*.¹⁹⁰

In his emphasis on the inherent link between purity of heart and sacrifice, Aphrahat thus drew on a growing tradition that conceived of an offering not in material terms but in terms of an inner, spiritual act of worship. The faithful continued to offer their sacrifice from a cultically pure site. However, this site was no longer the physical structure of the temple but rather the inner region of the pure heart. Since Christ, the Lifegiver, "gave His blood in place of all men,"¹⁹¹ animal sacrifices were no longer needed. Prayer had become the primary means of conversing with God. Aphrahat was

¹⁸⁹ *Odes of Solomon*, 20:1-5: "I am a priest of the Lord, and Him I serve as a priest; and to Him I offer the offering of His thought. For His thought is not like the world, nor like the flesh, nor like them who worship according to the flesh. The offering of the Lord is righteousness, and purity of heart and lips. Offer your inward being faultlessly; and let not your compassion oppress compassion; and let not yourself oppress a self." *Odes of Solomon*, ed. and trans. James Hamilton Charlesworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 85; *Didache* 14:1-2: "On the Lord's Day of the Lord come together, break bread and hold Eucharist, after confessing your transgressions that your offering may be pure; but let none who has a quarrel with his fellow join in your meeting until they be reconciled, that your sacrifice be not defiled;" in *Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, LCL (London: Heinemann; New York Putnam, 1912-1913), p. 330; reference to these passages can be found in Hanson (1979), pp. 4-5.

¹⁹⁰ *The Shepherd of Hermas* 56:8: "If then you thus fulfil the fast as I commanded you, your 'sacrifice shall be acceptable to God,' and this fast shall be written down to your credit, and the service which is thus done is good and joyful and acceptable to the Lord;" in *Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 2, LCL (London: Heinemann; New York Putnam, 1912-1913), p. 161. *Epistle of Barnabas* 2:7-10: "And again he says to them, 'Did I command your fathers when they came out of the land of Egypt to offer me burnt offerings and sacrifices? Nay, but rather did I command them this: Let none of you cherish any evil in his heart against his neighbour, and love not a false oath.' We ought then to understand, if we are not foolish, the loving intention of our Father, for he speaks to us, wishing that we should not err like them, but seek how we may make our offering to him. To us then he speaks thus: 'Sacrifice for the Lord is a broken heart, a smell of sweet savour to the Lord is a heart that glorifieth him that made it.' We ought, therefore, brethren, carefully to enquire concerning our salvation, in order that the evil one may not achieve a deceitful entry into us and hurl us away from our life;" in *Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and trans. Kirsopp Lake, vol. 1, LCL (London: Heinemann; New York Putnam, 1912-1913), p. 345; reference to these passages can be found in Hanson (1979), p. 5.

¹⁹¹ Aphrahat, *Dem* 2.6. (on love), trans. Frank Hudson Hallock, *Journal of the Society of Oriental Research* 14 (1930): 21.

acutely aware of this reconceptualization and, despite his debt to the Semitic tradition, was eager to present his ascetical doctrine in a genuine Christianized context:¹⁹²

For the uses of the law are abolished by the advent of our Lifegiver, and He offered up Himself in the place of the sacrifices which are in the law, and He was led as a lamb to the slaughter in the place of the lambs of propitiation. . . . He gave His blood in place of all men, that the blood of animals might not be required of us.¹⁹³

Sins are washed away in water, and prayer converses with God's majesty. See, my beloved, how sacrifices and offerings have been rejected, and prayer chosen in their place.¹⁹⁴

Aphrahat is emphatic. In accordance with the teaching of the apostles, he insists that the glorification of God by means of animal sacrifices offered in the Temple of Jerusalem has ceased to be timely. The Christ event has ushered in a new era which calls for the spiritual worship of God. Prayer is the new Christian sacrifice and the heart the site from which it is offered by all who strive for perfection and intimacy with God.

Aphrahat presents his vision of prayer as a spiritual sacrifice that is being offered in the pure heart vividly in the *Demonstrations*. The richness of this description owes much to his use of two important motifs, the motif of fire descending from heaven and the motif of the angelic liturgy. Both motifs are integral to his mystical teaching and situate it firmly within a liturgical context. Let us take a moment to pay closer attention to this important feature. If we bear in mind that the liturgical nature of Christian worship is inherently relational, drawing into close proximity members of the earthly and the divine community, we will begin to see that Aphrahat's liturgical conception of prayer calls into question the common assumption that silent prayer implies the isolated pursuit of

¹⁹² Alexander Golitzin, "The Place of the Presence of God: Aphrahat of Persia's Portrait of the Christian Holy Man," An Essay in Honor of Archimandrite Aimilianos of the Monastery of Simonos Petras, Mount Athos (2003), p. 5; <http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/aimilianos.html>.

¹⁹³ Aphrahat, *Dem* 2.6, in Hallock (1930): 21.

¹⁹⁴ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4. 19, in Brock (1987), p. 24-25.

perfection and the severing of ties with the local community.¹⁹⁵ We will have the opportunity to observe that Aphrahat and, indeed, many of his fellow early Christian theologians, were deeply committed to the communal nature of the mystical life and viewed the network of social relations elicited by the church as an all-important means of propelling Christians into the presence of God. For Aphrahat, pure prayer depended on active exchange with fellow-beings and failed to be of benefit if practiced in isolation.

As in so many instances, Aphrahat relies on Scripture to provide him with the motif of fire descending from heaven as well as the motif of the angelic liturgy. In his fourth *Demonstration*, he introduces the former motif by drawing attention to Judges 13:20 (Manoah's sacrifice), 1 Kings 18:38 (Elijah's sacrifice), 1 Chronicles 21:26 (David's sacrifice), and 2 Chronicles 7:1 (Solomon's sacrifice). He gives special prominence to Genesis 4:4, in which Abel's sacrifice is expounded:¹⁹⁶

First of all, it was through Abel's purity of heart that his offering was acceptable before God, while that of Cain was rejected. And how do we know that Abel's offering was accepted, while Cain's was rejected? . . . You are aware, my beloved, that an offering that was acceptable before God was distinguished by the fact that the fire would descend from heaven and the offering would be consumed by it. Now when Abel and Cain offered up their offerings both together, living fire that was doing service before God came down and devoured Abel's pure sacrifice, but did not touch Cain's because it was impure. . . . And the fruits of Cain's heart later testified and showed that he was full of deceit, when he killed his brother: for what his mind had conceived, his hands brought to birth. But Abel's purity of heart constitutes his prayer.¹⁹⁷

The motif of fire descending from heaven indicates that Abel's offering is pleasing to God and has been accepted. By employing it, Aphrahat suggests to members of his

¹⁹⁵ Brown (1988), p. 336.

¹⁹⁶ As pointed out by Brock, it is likely that Aphrahat, in this instance, resorted to a revision of the Septuagint by Theodotion, who, unlike most ancient and modern translators of the biblical passage, introduces the presence of divine fire into the account by rendering the Hebrew *wayyisha* not by 'and (God) had regard for (Abel and his offering)' but rather by 'and he enfiied.' See Brock (1987), p. 3; idem, "Fire from Heaven: from Abel's Sacrifice to the Eucharist. A Theme in Syriac Christianity," pp. 229-243, in *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy*, VCSS (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p. 231; idem, "Jewish Tradition in Syriac Sources," pp. 212-232, in *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature, and Theology*, VCSS (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 1992), p. 225.

¹⁹⁷ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.2, in Brock (1987), p. 6.

audience that they, too, may find favor with God and witness the consumption of their spiritual offering, if they present their sacrifice from an upright, receptive heart. If they follow Abel's example and conduct themselves in a virtuous manner, they will be able to experience the descent of God into their innermost selves and the transformation of their hearts into heavenly shrines.

Aphrahat reinforces the liturgical conceptualization of inner prayer by associating the motif of devouring fire with the image of the Holy Spirit and its descent onto the elements at the epiclesis, an association he suggests by referring to the coming of "living fire that was doing service before God" in the above words. No doubt, the sage's allusion to the consecratory role of the Holy Spirit during the anaphora, an image with which early Christians were well familiar,¹⁹⁸ and, hence, the contextualization of his teaching within an Eucharistic frame of reference would not have been lost on members of his audience. They would have deduced, we may assume, that the sacrifice of pure prayer invites the descent of the Holy Spirit into the human heart and its transfiguration in much the same way in which the elements offered on the visible altar of the church are sanctified and changed by the descending Spirit during public worship. For Aphrahat, the transformation of the heart into a divine temple allows for deeply personal, intimate contact with God:

And also the Blessed Apostle thus said: *You are the temple of God and the Spirit of Christ dwells in you.* And also our Lord again thus said to His disciples: *You are in Me and I am in you* (Jn 14:20).¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Brock (2006), p. 229. The ancient East Syrian Eucharistic prayer of Addai and Mari, who are said to have evangelized Edessa, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and the surrounding country, reads as follows: "May your Holy Spirit, Lord, come and rest on this offering of your servants, and bless and sanctify it," quoted in Bradshaw (1996), p. 61.

¹⁹⁹ Aphrahat, *Dem* 1.3 (on faith), in Philip Schaff, ed., *NPNF*, second series, vol. 13 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890.), p. 346. Within this context, two points deserve brief mention. Firstly, it is of interest to note that, in this particular instance, Aphrahat points to the Spirit as the subject of indwelling. On other, more frequent occasions, he focuses on Christ as the divine agent who inhabits the heart; see Murray (1975), p. 225. Secondly, it bears keeping in mind that Aphrahat, like other early Syriac writers, moves between the Spirit as the Holy Spirit and as the Spirit of Christ with great ease; see Brock (2006), p. 236. Both features reinforce the idea that, for Aphrahat, the clear delineation of theological concepts is not a

In his attempt to highlight the liturgical context of inner prayer and, thus, its inherently relational nature, Aphrahat introduces a further motif, the motif of the angelic liturgy. It is an image he develops with great interest in his fourteenth *Demonstration*, a stylistically unusual piece of writing in that it is an epistle to the church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon written by the sage on behalf of a local synod. In it, Aphrahat addresses a variety of matters yet focuses on the many internal problems that afflict the Persian church, including the shortcomings of its clergy.²⁰⁰ He interrupts his admonition on a number of occasions and, on one such occasion, presents a description of the glorified sage. As he does so, Aphrahat reiterates his conception of the heart as the new temple of God, this time including a detailed description of its interior:

Who has insight into the place of understanding? . . . Whoever has opened the door of his heart finds it . . . He [the sage] becomes the great temple of his Creator. Indeed, the King of the Heights enters and dwells in him, and lifts his intellect up to the heights, . . . and his heart is rapt in all its perception. He [the King] shows him a thing that he never knew. He gazes on that place and contemplates it, and his mind is stupefied by everything that it sees: all the watchers hastening to his ministry, the seraphim chanting the thrice-holy [lit. "sanctifying"] to his glory, flying swiftly with their wings, and their vestments white and shining, their faces are covered at his radiance, their courses swifter than the wind, there is the throne of the kingdom established.²⁰¹

Aphrahat's description of the interior liturgy is rich indeed. By descending into the heart and witnessing the angelic celebration, the glorified sage shares in an experience that defies human conceptualization. The mind is stupefied as it contemplates the angelic lower clergy, the watchers, hurrying to accomplish their ministry while the seraphic priests, clothed in shining vestments and covering their faces from the blinding radiance

pressing matter and that his doctrine is not subject to the detailed rational explications that characterize most of Nicene and post-Nicene theology; see footnote 11.

²⁰⁰ *Unterweisung* 14 (Über die Ermahnung), in Aphrahat (1991), vol. 2, pp. 327-392.

²⁰¹ The English translation of this passage has been taken from Golitzin (2003b), pp. 3-4. Golitzin also presents a valuable discussion of the passage.

of Divinity, chant the celestial *Trisagion* (the Thrice-Holy) before God's throne. No prior experience can be likened to God's self-disclosure in the human heart. By opening the door of the heart and entering the great temple of the Creator, the sage catches a glimpse of the heavenly liturgical celebration and its unspeakable glory. The sage also catches a glimpse of the communal nature of this celebration. As the angels draw into their ranks worthy Christians, inviting them to join the eschatological messianic community, the boundaries between the earthly and the heavenly dissolve. Temporal limitations cease to be of consequence. By engaging in inner prayer and worshipping God in the unblemished heart, Christians experience the peace, equality, and unity of the angelic realm. They experience true catholicity which lies in the transcendence of all divisions in Christ.²⁰²

Aphrahat looks to the angels, God's vigilant ministers, with great interest. For him, they are the spiritual ideal to which Christians who seek perfection aspire; they are the model after which sages mold themselves.²⁰³ The angels are also important intermediaries and facilitate the divine-human encounter by presenting spiritual offerings to God:

You who pray should remember that you are making an offering before God: let not Gabriel who presents the prayers be ashamed by an offering that has a blemish. When you pray to be forgiven, and acknowledge that you yourself forgive, consider first in your mind whether you really do forgive and only then acknowledge 'I forgive'.²⁰⁴

The above words emphasize the mediating activity of the angels and reiterate the importance of offering a pure sacrifice. In a subsequent passage, Aphrahat expounds on

²⁰² Zizioulas (1987), pp. 29-30. See also John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), p. 162.

²⁰³ Brock (1987), p. xxv.

²⁰⁴ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.13, in Brock (1987), pp. 17-18.

this point by noting that Gabriel will refuse to present an offering before God if forgiveness has not been granted. The need for reconciliation is ever on his mind:

When you bring an offering and remember you have some grudge against your brother, leave your offering in front of the altar, and go and be reconciled with your brother; then come back and make your offering (Mt 5:23-24).²⁰⁵

Notable about both of the above citations is Aphrahat's emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, that is, on interpersonal relations. According to the Persian sage, the celebration of the interior liturgy of the heart does not merely usher in new relations with members of the heavenly church. It also allows for the deepening of human relationships.²⁰⁶ For Aphrahat, the ability to reach out to fellow-beings, to forgive and to seek reconciliation, is an inner development that occurs as a matter of course in all who strive for perfection. As religious seekers begin the process of purifying their hearts, as they gain in virtue, they learn to adopt a more forgiving stance toward fellow-humans. They empty their hearts of evil and are free to perceive the inner stirrings of kindness and compassion. Christians who seek perfection acquire a new identity based on the eternal filial relationship between the Father and the Son; they acquire by grace the sonship Christ enjoys by nature.²⁰⁷ In this manner, they are able to transcend biological as well as social divisions and to approach their neighbors as equals, worthy of respect and love. Henceforth, the charitable reaching out to fellow-beings lies not only within the realm of the possible but within the realm of the inevitable.

A clear indication that Aphrahat deems charitable conduct an integral aspect of the mystical quest is provided by his teaching on purity of heart as the very essence of prayer. Indeed, for Aphrahat, purity of heart, that is, the engagement in noble, generous deeds, is

²⁰⁵ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.13, in Brock (1987), p. 18.

²⁰⁶ Zizioulas (1987), p. 29.

²⁰⁷ Zizioulas (1987), pp. 29-30.

prayer itself. If the fruits of Abel's heart testify to his goodness and constitute his prayer, our pure hearts, our charitable deeds, constitute our prayer. Aphrahat does not distinguish between these aspects of Christian existence. Kind and generous acts, purity of heart, and inner prayer are one and the same. The more Christians transcend imposed boundaries and seek to live their lives in the unity of Christ, the nobler their deeds, the truer their hearts, and the purer their prayers.

Prayer, as conceived by Aphrahat, is thus never limited to the silent withdrawal into the self and the solitary encounter with God. While the Persian sage is a great proponent of interiority and never calls into question the value of conversing silently with God,²⁰⁸ Christians engage in this practice primarily as a means to an end. It is a tool meant to guide them toward the true goal of the Christian life, i.e. the ability to apprehend the presence of God in the world and to cultivate interpersonal relations to which this presence gives rise.²⁰⁹ Not surprisingly, Aphrahat therefore cautions his audience never to let prayer (as it is commonly understood) interfere with the endeavor to "give rest to the weary, visit the sick, [and] make provisions for the poor."²¹⁰ These acts, rather than the practice of formal prayer, constitute genuine worship and are most pleasing to God. They are the means by which humans effect the 'rest' of God:

Watch out, my beloved, lest, when some opportunity of 'giving rest' to the will of God meets you, you say 'the time for prayer is at hand. I will pray and then act'. And while you are seeking to complete your prayer, that opportunity for 'giving rest' will escape from you: you will be incapacitated from doing the will and 'rest' of God, and it will be through your prayer that you will be guilty of sin. Rather, effect the 'rest' of God, and that will constitute prayer.²¹¹

²⁰⁸ Hence, he writes: "I have written to you, my beloved, to the effect that a person should do the will of God, and that constitutes prayer. That is how prayer seems to me to excel. Nevertheless, just because I have said this to you, do not neglect prayer," *Dem* 4.16, in Brock (1987), p. 21.

²⁰⁹ Juana Raasch, "The Monastic Concept of Purity of Heart and Its Sources (IV)," *Studia Monastica* (1969): 272-282, quoted in Dempsey (1999), pp. 36-38; McIntosh (1998), pp. 6-7.

²¹⁰ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.14, in Brock (1987), p. 19.

²¹¹ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.14, in Brock (1987), p. 20.

Aphrahat expounds his conception of prayer clearly and concisely. Prayer denotes all activities that are undertaken with the intention of giving rest to God by easing the burden of fellow-humans. Prayer implies the continuous reaching out to the neighbor. It describes the Christian way of life even in what may appear to be the most ordinary and mundane of moments. Aphrahat reiterates the idea that a person's prayer may be purest in precisely such moments in the following words:

Or again, suppose you go on a journey during the winter and you meet rain and snow and get exhausted from cold. If once again you run into a friend of yours at the time of prayer and he answers you in the same way, and you die of cold, what profit will his prayer have, seeing that he has not alleviated someone in trouble? For our Lord, in his description of the time of judgement when he separated out those who were to stand on his right and on his left, said to those on his right: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was sick and you visited me, I was a stranger and you welcomed me in" (Mt 25:35). He spoke in the same sort of way to those on his left, and because they had done none of these things, He sent them into torment, while those on the right He sent into the kingdom.²¹²

Given this understanding of prayer, it is little surprising that Aphrahat and fellow-*ihīdāyē* chose to adopt a lifestyle that asked them to strike a balance between interiority, silence, and the celibate life on the one hand and active involvement in the world on the other hand. The quest for God never excluded the neighbor. Members of the Covenant viewed involvement in the many practical matters of daily existence as a valuable opportunity to effect the rest of God. Involvement in everyday tasks was their prayer and allowed them to glorify God throughout the day, every day.

With these ideas in mind, it may be suggested that, for Aphrahat, the relational nature of inner prayer is the driving force behind the gradual transformation of a person into God's temple. Because interpersonal relationships impel individuals to examine their patterns of thought and behavior, to acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, and to

²¹² Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.15, in Brock (1987), pp. 20-21.

ponder their mission in life, the communal setting of Christian existence initiates a process of inner growth and transformation that brings humans closer to their essential being and to the divine life that resides in their deepest selves, their hearts.²¹³ Commitment to the ascetical life and the continuous reaching out to fellow-humans sensitizes individuals to the impact they can have on the world around them; it allows them to discern their true identity and uniqueness. A stronger sense of identity and purpose facilitated through the network of communal relationships, in turn, allows for heightened awareness of God's all-pervasive presence in the world and opens the door to greater intimacy with Divinity. Then again, greater intimacy with Divinity and the initiation into the heavenly church allow individuals to perceive their surrounding with newfound clarity and to overcome the many obstacles that keep humans apart.

As suggested in the introduction, this study is conducted in part with the intention of rectifying the mistaken belief that the mystical life, as it was conceived by early Christian ascetics, implies withdrawal from the world and the isolated strivings of an individual for perfection. Throughout this section, the attempt has therefore been made to show that the life of interiority as envisioned by Aphrahat does not imply a closing off and disengaging from interpersonal relations. On the contrary, Aphrahat insists that greater intimacy with God can be attained only by heeding the neighbor and by remaining closely connected to the local community. For Aphrahat, the true follower of Christ is the person who engages in active service and social philanthropy. The true follower of the Christ imitates the latter's charitable deeds on a daily basis and, by doing so, reconciles humans to one another and to God.

²¹³ McIntosh (1998), pp. 6-7.

For modern Christians living in the world and bound to it by numerous commitments, this teaching promises to be welcome news. By establishing that intimacy with God can be attained through ongoing interaction with the surrounding world, indeed, by suggesting that the apprehension of God in the inner temple of the heart depends on the cultivation of interpersonal relations and 'love in action,' contemporary Christians have at their disposal a powerful means of purifying their heart and of transforming it into a place of divine indwelling. Even if unable to immerse themselves fully in a life of interiority and silent meditation, they are able to seek divine closeness throughout the day, if only they take advantage of the many opportunities provided by mundane, daily living to do the will of God. If they heed embodied, communal existence and look to their neighbor with love and respect, they have the means of offering to God the purest of prayers and of joining the angels in their heavenly celebration of the liturgy. By relating more fully to fellow-beings, they are provided with the opportunity of drawing ever closer to God and of experiencing an intimacy with Divinity they may not have believed attainable by individuals engaged in the turmoil of worldly existence.

Now that we have considered Aphrahat's debt to the biblical tradition of the heart and its ramifications for the Christian life of prayer, it is time to turn our attention to a second prominent theologian of the early Syrian church, Ephrem of Nisibis. Let us explore Ephrem's understanding of the mystical life by addressing his debt to the Hebraic tradition of the heart and its holistic conception of human nature. Let us consider if Ephrem follows Aphrahat's lead and conceives of the pure heart as God's temple. Does he contribute to the reconceptualization of biblical temple imagery by presenting the celebration of the liturgy in terms of an inner, spiritual event? Is Ephrem as committed to

a teaching that features a strong relational component and heralds the belief that God is encountered through involvement in communal, day-to-day existence? We will explore these questions in the upcoming section.

Ephrem the Syrian

Born of Christian parents in c. 306, Ephrem was a deacon, catechetical teacher, and ascetic of the church of Nisibis, a town located on the most eastern frontier of the Roman Empire. Nisibis was repeatedly besieged and finally ceded to the Sassanids in 363, an event that forced the Christian population to leave the city. The elderly Ephrem relocated to Edessa where he preached, taught, and served as hymn writer to a community of Christian virgins until his death in 373.²¹⁴

Like Aphrahat, Ephrem was a member of the Covenant, a follower of the Only-Begotten, and his teaching is greatly shaped by the outlook of this early Syrian ascetic community. Ephrem elucidates this teaching in a large body of work which includes scriptural commentaries, refutations of dualistic speculations, letters, a discourse, homilies, and hymns.²¹⁵ He is best known for his large collection of hymns which is of such beauty and poetry as to establish him as the foremost Syrian hymnographer.²¹⁶

Ephrem's hymns cover a wide selection of topics and address, amongst others, the church, the crucifixion, the nativity, the resurrection, virginity, fasting, faith, and heresies. They are deeply Semitic in character and abound with the use of scriptural symbols. For this reason, they are reminiscent of targumic and midrashic traditions known for their metaphorical reading of biblical texts and, like the writings of Aphrahat, show few signs

²¹⁴ For biographical information see Brock (1992), pp. 16-17; idem (1987), p. 30; McGuckin (2004b), v.s. "Ephrem the Syrian," pp. 118-119; F. Rilliet, "Ephrem the Syrian," *EEC* 1.276-277.

²¹⁵ For a helpful discussion of Ephrem's writings see Brock (1992), pp. 17-19; idem (1990), pp. 33-36.

²¹⁶ McGuckin (2004b), p. 118.

of systematic Greek thought patterns.²¹⁷

Ephrem presents much of his teaching on inner prayer in the *Hymns on Faith*, a large cycle of hymns which, as the title suggests, is devoted to the explication of faith. In hymn 20 of this cycle, he pays special attention to the close link between prayer and faith.

Ephrem writes:

In a single body are both Prayer and Faith to be found, the one hidden, the other revealed; the one for the Hidden One, the other to be seen. Hidden prayer is for the hidden ear of God, while faith is for the visible ear of humanity.²¹⁸

As humans struggle to turn from the road of darkness and injustice to the road of light and righteousness, Ephrem instructs them to let prayer wipe clean their murky thoughts and to let faith wipe clean their senses outwardly.²¹⁹ Once prayer and faith work in tandem, the one purifying the inner senses, the other the outer senses, human beings are able to overcome inner division and to collect themselves before God. This process allows Christians to follow the *Īhīdāyā* with integrity and single-mindedness.

Integral to Ephrem's understanding of prayer and faith and a reoccurring motif in his hymns is the image of the heart. Reminiscent of biblical writers and of Aphrahat, Ephrem views the heart as the very center of human beings which defines them in their most profound reality. For him, the heart is not merely the seat of emotion but the source of all thought, volition, planning, and wisdom. If the heart is filled with desire, it is incapable of counsel.²²⁰ The "wrath of the heart"²²¹ leaves human beings devoid of insight and discernment. Like Paul, Ephrem views the heart as the place where the good news is

²¹⁷ Rilliet, *EEC* 1.276.

²¹⁸ Ephrem, *Faith* 20.10, in Brock (1987), p. 34.

²¹⁹ Ephrem, *Faith* 20.17, in Brock (1987), p. 35.

²²⁰ Dempsey (1999), p. 36.

²²¹ Ephrem, *Church* 14.7, in Edmund Beck, *Des Heiligen Ephraem des Syrers: Hymnen de Ecclesia*, CSCO (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1960), p. 36.

professed.²²² Here, faith takes root and grows.²²³ The inability to embrace the good news single-mindedly and to profess it internally as well as externally results in a heart that is divided and prone to sin:

A man's feet and eyes reprove him for being thus divided; the heart is like a toiling ox, equally divided, for it has divided itself up between two yokes, the righteous yoke, and that of injustice.²²⁴

Like Aphrahat before him, Ephrem points to the heart as the place where Christians offer their pure prayer. The parallelism of both teachings is particularly pronounced in a hymn which survives only in an Armenian translation and which, in its emphasis on the power of inner prayer, calls to mind Aphrahat's exposition in his fourth

Demonstration:

Prayer that rises up in someone's heart serves to open up for us the door of heaven: that person stands in converse with the Divinity and gives pleasure to the Son of God. Prayer makes peace with the Lord's anger and with the vehemence of his wrath. In this way too, tears that well up in the eyes can open the door of compassion.²²⁵

Loyal to biblical teaching, Ephrem views the heart as the doorway to the supernatural realm. It is the meeting-place between God and the individual. By offering their prayer in the heart, humans ready themselves for the direct encounter with Divinity. They appease God and give pleasure to the Son. So great is the pleasure the pure in heart give to the Son that he takes up permanent residence in their innermost self, transforming it into his bridal chamber:

²²² Ephrem, *Faith* 20.8, in Brock (1987), p. 34.

²²³ Ephrem, *Church* 25.15, in Beck (1960), p. 57.

²²⁴ Ephrem, *Faith* 20.15, in Brock (1987), p. 35.

²²⁵ Ephrem, *Hymns Preserved in Armenian* 1.3, in Brock (1987), pp. 36. Brock points out that an element of doubt surrounds the authorship of this particular hymn. For passages in hymns that have been shown to be genuine works of Ephrem and that convey a very similar teaching, see, for instance, Ephrem's *Faith* 20.6: "Petition that has been refined is the virgin of the inner chamber: if she passes the door of the mouth, she is like one astray. Truth is her bridal chamber, love her crown, stillness and silence are the trusty eunuchs at her door," in Brock (1987), p. 34. Ephrem here draws on the widespread early Christian understanding that the 'inner chamber' of Matthew 6:6 refers to the heart, Brock (2006), p. 240.

How wonderful is this abundance
that the Lord should reside in us continually,
for He has left the heavens and descended:
let us make holy for Him the bridal chamber of our hearts.²²⁶

Ephrem conveys a very similar teaching in a passage in which he addresses the notion of circumcision. Contrasting outward and inward circumcision and emphasizing the importance of the latter, he reiterates the belief that a pure, circumcised heart invites God to turn it into a divine dwelling-place. It is of interest to note that Ephrem, like Aphrahat, places his teaching, which owes so much to the Semitic tradition, within a genuine Christian context:

With a circumcised heart
uncircumcision becomes holy:
in the bridal chamber of such a person's heart
the Creator resides.²²⁷

The above words convey the importance Ephrem accords to the inner, spiritual worship of God. Like Aphrahat and many early Christian theologians, he rejects external rituals, such as circumcision and the sacrifice of animals, and welcomes their replacement by interior rites. Pure inner prayer is the new Christian sacrifice. Baptism rather than circumcision is the means by which individuals become betrothed to the heavenly Bridegroom and members of the Christian community.

Ephrem's emphasis on spiritual worship invites the question if he, like Aphrahat, highlights this feature by employing the motif of the interior liturgy of the heart. Does he view the heart as a temple where divine fire descends onto the pure sacrifice of prayer, transforming people's deepest selves? Is the heart a place where Christians join the angels

²²⁶ Ephrem, *Armenian Hymns* 47.46-47, cited in Brock (1992), p. 128.

²²⁷ Ephrem, *Virginity* 44.20, cited in Brock (1992), p. 128.

in their praise of God and experience the timeless splendor of the eschatological messianic community?

Ephrem repeatedly describes Divinity in terms of fire and establishes an explicit link between fire and the Holy Spirit. Like Aphrahat, he places the symbol of fire within an Eucharistic context:

In fire is the symbol of the Spirit,
it is a type of the Holy Spirit
who is mixed in the baptismal water
so that it may be for absolution,
and in the bread,
so that it may be an offering.²²⁸

His symbolic use of fire in the context of the Eucharist is brought to the fore in yet another passage, a passage that vividly calls to mind the biblical theme of fire descending from heaven to consume the pure sacrifice:

Fire descended in wrath and consumed sinners,
the fire of mercy has now descended and dwelt in the bread.
Instead of that fire which consumed mankind,
you have consumed Fire in the Bread, and you have come to life!
Fire descended and consumed Elijah's sacrifices,
the fire of mercies has become a living sacrifice for us;
Fire consumed the oblation,
and we, Lord, have consumed your Fire in your oblations.²²⁹

The above words are highly suggestive of Aphrahat's references to the heart as the temple of God and as the place where the worthy offer their spiritual sacrifice, hoping for its acceptance and consummation by divine fire. However, unlike Aphrahat, Ephrem does not appear to relate the consecratory role of divine fire specifically to the heart, speaking rather of its purifying and sanctifying effect on the body.²³⁰ While he establishes an

²²⁸ Ephrem, *Faith* 40.10, in Brock (2006), p. 234.

²²⁹ Ephrem, *Faith* 10.12-13, in Brock (2006), pp. 234-235.

²³⁰ See, for instance: "When Moses signed and anointed the sons of the Levite Aaron, fire consumed their bodies, fire preserved their clothes. Blessed are you, my brethren, for the fire of mercy has come down,

intimate link between the heart and faith and views the former as the site where humans offer up their prayers, he does not contribute significantly to the interiorization of the temple motif. For him, the heart is first and foremost the bridal chamber where Christ, the heavenly Bridegroom, and the soul meet. It is less a liturgical site where the angels and the glorified sage celebrate the Eucharist.

While Ephrem does not contribute to the reconceptualization of the biblical temple motif by presenting the heart as a place of interior, liturgical celebration, he nevertheless provides us with other teachings of great value to a better understanding of the prayer of the heart tradition, one such teaching being his conception of the body as God's temple. Greatly informed by the central Christian doctrine of the incarnation, Ephrem views the fact that God assumed a body to redeem humankind as an important indicator of its inherent goodness. Without assuming human flesh, the Son could not have set in motion a process that sanctifies body and soul alike. Only by becoming enfleshed was Divinity able to manifest itself and to reveal to humankind the extent of its mercy and love:

Glory to the Spiritual, Who was pleased to have a Body, that in it His virtue might be felt, and He might by that Body show mercy on His household's bodies.²³¹

Glory to that Voice Which became Body, and to the Word of the High One Which became Flesh! Hear Him also, O ears, and see Him, O eyes, and feel Him, O hands, and eat Him, O mouth! Ye members and senses give praise unto Him, that came and quickened the whole body!²³²

Ephrem provides additional proof of the body's value by pointing to the Eucharist. Would Christ have "clothed himself in the Bread, seeing that bread is related to that

utterly devouring your sins, purifying and sanctifying your bodies," Ephrem, *Epiphany* 3.10, in Brock (2006), p. 234.

²³¹ Ephrem, *Nativity* 2.3, in *NPNF*, second series, vol. 8, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1956), p. 227.

²³² Ephrem, *Nativity* 3.11, in Schaff (1956), p. 232.

feeble body,”²³³ if he had despised the body as something unclean and unworthy? Would Christians be permitted to consume the Body and Blood of Christ and to perceive Divinity viscerally within themselves if their bodies were impure and unfit to mingle with the Holy Mysteries?²³⁴ Surely not. Ephrem makes a particularly strong case for the body’s inherent goodness and its essential role in the inner apprehension of God in his renowned *Hymns on Paradise*. Let us consider this teaching and its implications for the tradition of the prayer of the heart in greater detail.

In his *Hymns on Paradise*, Ephrem describes the Kingdom of God as a mountain, an understanding that is repeatedly suggested in the Old Testament. He divides the divine mountain into three different levels, likening them, among others, to the different parts of the Old Testament Temple (the holy place, the sanctuary veil, the holy of holies) and to the tripartite nature of humanity. With regard to the threefold structure of human nature, Ephrem suggests that the mountain’s lower slopes relate to the body (*gushma*), its higher slopes to the soul (*naphsha*), and its heights to the intellectual spirit (*tar’itha*).²³⁵ Although the body is less glorious than the soul and the spirit and can neither be likened to the sanctuary veil nor to the holy of holies, the terrain where God and the worshipper come face to face, the body is nevertheless indispensable to the discernment of God, for the soul “cannot have perception of Paradise without its mate, the body, its instrument and lyre.”²³⁶ The importance of the body as the soul’s companion and instrument of perception is conveyed in the following passage:

²³³ Ephrem, *Heresies* 47.2, cited in Brock (1992), p. 37.

²³⁴ Ephrem, *Heresies* 43.3, cited in Brock (1992), p. 37.

²³⁵ Brock (1990), p. 53.

²³⁶ Ephrem, *Paradise* 8.2, in Brock (1990), pp. 131-32.

That the soul cannot see without the body's frame,
the body itself persuades, since if the body becomes blind
the soul is blind in it, groping about with it;
see how each looks and attests to the other,
how the body has need of the soul in order to live,
and the soul too requires the body in order to see and to hear.²³⁷

For Ephrem, the body is an instrument of heavenly ascent; it is an important vehicle by means of which humans perceive the inner presence of God. Through the body, the soul is capable of sensing God and of perceiving a dimension—the divine, immaterial dimension—to whose reality no cognitive evidence can speak. The body's perceptual faculties and intuitive awareness allow the soul to capture and experience what eludes the mind in understanding.²³⁸ Without the body, the soul is deprived of strength and insight:

If the soul, while in the body, resembles an embryo
and is unable to know either itself or its companion,
how much more feeble will it then be once it has left the body,
no longer possessing on its own the senses
which are able to serve as tools for its use.
For it is through the senses of its companion that it shines forth and becomes evident.²³⁹

By considering the above words and giving special thought to the last line, we discern a further reason why the body is vital to the encounter with God. If we recall Aphrahat's understanding that purity of heart hinges on the steady deepening of interpersonal relationships and that engagement in charitable deeds is the primary means of pleasing God, we come to see that Christians depend on embodied existence to be present to the world and, by being present to the world, to give rest to God. Without the body, the soul cannot shine forth and become evident. Humans cannot act upon the soul's hidden stirrings and manifest its love and goodwill. They do not have a voice with which

²³⁷ Ephrem, *Paradise* 8.4, in Brock (1990), p. 132.

²³⁸ Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), pp. 175-176.

²³⁹ Ephrem, *Paradise* 8.6, in Brock (1990), p. 133.

to console the weary and offer encouragement to the downcast. Without the body, humans do not have the means of engaging in what Aphrahat deems genuine prayer and of acting in accordance with the divine will. Just as God had need of a body to manifest divine mercy and love to humankind, humans rely on the body to convey to the world the soul's hidden longings and intentions and, by doing so, of working toward their reconciliation with the world and with God. If Ephrem inquires why the soul is confined in the body if it were able to see and to hear without it,²⁴⁰ he also wonders why the soul is confined in the body, if it were able to shine forth and manifest itself without the aid of its companion.

The idea of the body as a God-given instrument by means of which humans give rest to the Lord is an integral aspect of Ephrem's mystical doctrine. The inherent link between embodied existence and a person's ability to draw into the presence of Divinity through charitable conduct is reiterated in the following passage:

Elisha was the equal of the Watchers—in his doings, glorious and holy.—The camp of the Watchers was round about him;—thus let Baptism be unto you,—a camp of guardians,—for by means of it there dwells in the heart—the hope of them that are below—and the Lord of them that are above.—Sanctify for Him your bodies,—for where He abides, corruption comes not near.²⁴¹

For Ephrem, as for Aphrahat before him, baptism marks a person's entrance into the earthly community of the Spirit which foreshadows the peacefulness and equality of the heavenly community. By performing glorious and holy deeds, Christians emulate the perfection of the angels and effect their progressive sanctification. As God's earthly dwelling-place, the body plays a prominent role in this process. It allows for the deepening of interpersonal relations on which the quest for God is based. By serving as

²⁴⁰ Ephrem, *Paradise* 8.3, in Brock (1990), p. 132.

²⁴¹ Ephrem, *Epiphany* 8.19, in Schaff (1956), p. 278.

active members of the local community, the pure in heart help to overcome the many divisions that keep humans apart. As they reach out to the neighbor, they manifest, in the here and now, the community the risen Christ will assemble around him on the last day.²⁴² With this idea in mind, it is not surprising that the one well-attested episode of Ephrem's last years concerns his efforts to distribute food to the poor during a famine.²⁴³

While Ephrem does not greatly expound on the idea of the heart as the new Christian temple and as a place of liturgical celebration, the above discussion has hopefully indicated some of the ways in which his mystical doctrine contributed significantly to the shaping of the prayer of the heart. For Ephrem, as for Aphrahat, the heart symbolized a person's deepest, truest self and was the place from which the faithful offer their pure prayer. Like Aphrahat, Ephrem was greatly indebted to the biblical notion of the heart as the doorway to heaven and as the locus of the divine-human encounter. He was convinced that the heart of stone can be transformed and experience greater intimacy with God.

In accordance with holistic biblical anthropology, Ephrem could not conceive of the soul's quest for perfection apart from the body. For him, the soul-body divide did not exist. Without the body, the soul lacked its all-important means of apprehending God. If the perception of Divinity defied rational cognition, it did not defy the body's intuitive faculty. While divine reality could not be grasped intellectually, it could be known viscerally. In the absence of all other evidence, the somatic perception of Deity attested to its abiding inner presence.

²⁴² Zizioulas (1987), pp. 27-28.

²⁴³ Brock (1992), p. 17.

But there was yet another reason why Ephrem deemed the body essential to the mystical quest. Not only did the body reveal God's inner presence to the soul, it also manifested the latter's hidden desires and wishes to the world. If the body had once been a vital tool of divine revelation, it continued to serve within this capacity on behalf of the individual soul. Ephrem suggested that, through the body, the soul made itself known to the world and participated in its affairs. Through the body, it reached out to fellow-beings, overcame strife, and reconciled humans to one another and to God. For Ephrem, the body was a true mediator. By making the hidden manifest, it facilitated communion on all levels of human existence.

To conclude this discussion of Ephrem's contributions to the doctrine of the prayer of the heart, let us make one final observation. It is worth noting that Ephrem was not consistent in his use of anthropological terminology. In some instances, he emphasized the heart as the place where humans come face to face with God while, in other instances, he pointed to the soul instead.²⁴⁴ On occasion, he would also refer to the human faculty illuminated by the glory of Divinity as the mind or intellective spirit.²⁴⁵

On the one hand, this tendency reinforces the idea that Ephrem, as an adherent of symbolic theology, never took to literalism and definitions.²⁴⁶ He preferred a theological vision that was dynamic and, like the experience of God itself, ever changing. On the other hand, Ephrem's tendency to draw on anthropological terms other than those of Scripture suggests that the fourth century theologian, while deeply indebted to Christianity's Semitic heritage, was not unaware of its Hellenic legacy. Although it was

²⁴⁴ Edmund Beck, *Ephrāms des Syrers: Psychologie und Erkenntnislehre*, CSCO (Louvain: Secrétariat du CorpusSCO, 1980), p. 15.

²⁴⁵ McGuckin (1999), p. 97. Indications of Ephrem's teaching on the mind as the place of the divine-human encounter can be found, for instance, in Ephrem, *Faith* 20.1, 5, in Brock (1987), pp. 34-35; see also Ephrem, *Epiphany* 8.22, in Schaff (1956), p. 278.

²⁴⁶ Brock (1992), pp. 23-24.

primarily from the fifth century onwards that the Syrian tradition came under the influence of Greek thought forms, Ephrem was not wholly beyond the reach of this influence.²⁴⁷ Like all early Christian theologians, he articulated his ascetical doctrine along a continuum, ranging from distinctly Semitic to distinctly Hellenic modes of expression. If his interchangeable use of anthropological vocabulary suggests anything to us, it points to the dynamic and fluid nature of early Christian mystical teaching. It suggests that theologians, including Ephrem, rarely committed to an extreme position. It cautions us not to compartmentalize the doctrines of these theologians into distinct schools of thought.

The next early Christian theologian we will consider is Pseudo-Macarius, a prominent fourth century ascetic who is commonly viewed as the foremost representative of the Syrian mystical tradition. Yet before we do so and as a means of deepening our understanding of the interior liturgical celebration and its inherently relational nature, let us cast a glance at a number of later Syrian theologians who followed more overtly than Ephrem in Aphrahat's footsteps and envisioned inner prayer in terms of an interior Eucharistic assembly. Let us consider the degree to which they, too, looked to the heart as a place in which humans are reconciled to each other, to the angels, and to God.

We have already seen that a commitment to the reconceptualization of the temple motif propelled Aphrahat to describe prayer in terms of an internal sacrifice which is offered in the pure heart, the new Christian temple. We have also seen that Aphrahat reinforced this liturgical conception of prayer by proposing that the spiritual sacrifice, if

²⁴⁷ Brock (1987), p. xii. Brock points out that this influence, however, never influenced the deep structure of his thought.

acceptable to God, will be consumed by divine fire, a motif he linked implicitly to the consecratory role of the Holy Spirit during the Eucharist.

Strongly reminiscent of this teaching is the mystical doctrine presented in the *Liber Graduum*, or *Book of Steps*, which consists of thirty homilies and deals specifically with the more advanced stages of the Christian life. Like the writings of Aphrahat and Ephrem, it is representative of Persian Christianity.²⁴⁸ While the content of the *Liber Graduum* leaves readers in no doubt as to the importance of the visible church and its sacraments, the author focuses largely on the idea that spiritual growth allows Christians to transform their bodies into temples of God and their hearts into interior altars. The heart is the locale around which the hidden church assembles to offer its sacrifice of thanksgiving. In the heart, the heavenly church is made manifest. The following citation from the seventh *Discourse*, which deals specifically with the hidden and the manifest church, provides much insight into the author's point of view. After an opening reference to hidden prayer of the heart as the continuous pondering on the Lord, the author resumes his discussion in the following manner:

Since we also know that the body is become a hidden temple and the heart a hidden altar for ministry in the spirit, we should show our eagerness at this visible temple, so that, as we labour in these, we may have rest for ever in that church in heaven which is free and magnificent, and at that altar which is adorned and exalted in the spirit, before which the angels and all the saints minister, while Jesus acts as priest and effects sanctification before them, above them, and on every side of them. . . . [O]nce we have attained to humility and have shown honour to everyone, great and small, the heavenly church and the spiritual altar will be revealed to us, and on the altar we shall make a sacrifice of thanksgiving in the prayer of our hearts and in the supplication of our bodies, believing all the time in this visible altar, and assured in this priesthood ministering there.²⁴⁹

Like Aphrahat, the author conceives of the heart as a place from which Christians offer up their prayers; it is a sacred space where the divine-human encounter takes place.

²⁴⁸ Brock (1987), p. 42.

²⁴⁹ LG 7.1-2, in Brock (1987), pp. 46-48.

The author goes beyond previous descriptions of the heart by viewing it not merely as an inner temple but as an interior altar. Here, the saints and angels gather to minister to God. Here, all beings are unified by the sanctifying grace of Christ. As members of the eschatological messianic community, they know neither strife nor division. The celebration of the interior liturgy around the altar of the heart allows for new, deeper exchanges between humans, the angels, and God.

The author of the *Liber Graduum* emphasizes the communal setting of the interior liturgical celebration by suggesting a close link between inner prayer and virtuous behavior. Humility and respect are vital if Christians wish to participate in the heavenly liturgy and to assemble around the spiritual altar. For him, as for Aphrahat, upright conduct purifies the heart and allows individuals to offer a sacrifice that is acceptable to God. Charitable deeds and active involvement in the community of the church are the defining features of the quest for God. Reminiscent of his predecessor, the author of the *Book of Steps* thus does not conceive of inner prayer in terms of an individual's isolated strivings for perfection. His frame of reference is the visible church and its Eucharistic assembly. Members of this assembly join the heavenly church by strengthening all who are sick and by comforting those in need.²⁵⁰ The community of the manifest church points the way to the community of the hidden church. The former anticipates the unity, justice, and peace of the latter.²⁵¹

The author of the *Liber Graduum* does not dwell on the motif of fire to draw out further the liturgical, relational nature of inner prayer. While he makes use of this image

²⁵⁰ LG 7.3, in Brock (1987), p. 49.

²⁵¹ LG 7.4, in Brock (1987), p. 49. For a discussion of the *Book of Steps* and its author's emphasis on the communal setting of the Christian life see Brown (1988), p. 334.

and associates it with the Spirit,²⁵² he does not establish an explicit connection between fire and the celebration of the interior liturgy. If we wish to trace this association in greater detail, we have to turn our attention to Martyrius, also known by his Syriac name Sahdona, a monk who wrote in the first half of the seventh century. Martyrius incorporated into his mystical doctrine many aspects touched upon in the above discussions of Aphrahat and Ephrem. Reminiscent of their writings, the work of this seventh century monk establishes the need for purity of heart and the importance of leading a life of charity. Like the anonymous author of the *Book of Steps*, Martyrius views the heart as an interior altar from which the faithful offer their pure sacrifice of prayer.²⁵³ He further suggests that pure prayer, if acceptable, is consumed by God's devouring fire, a teaching which, like the teaching of Aphrahat, evokes the descent of the Spirit at the epiclesis and deepens the Eucharistic reading of inner prayer.²⁵⁴ Martyrius establishes an explicit link between heavenly fire, the consecratory role of the Holy Spirit, and inner prayer in the following passage which touches on many prominent themes of his ascetical doctrine:

So, if the commencement of our prayer is wakeful and attentive, and we wet our cheeks with tears stemming from the emotion of our heart, then our prayer will be made perfect, in accordance with God's wish, being without blemish, it will be accepted in his presence, and the Lord will be pleased with us and have delight in our offering. As he perceives the pleasing scent of our heart's pure fragrance, He will send the fire of the Spirit to consume our sacrifices . . . our hearts will be given spiritual joy, along with hidden mysteries which I am unable to disclose in words to the simple. In this way we make our bodies a living holy and acceptable sacrifice, one that pleases God in our rational service.²⁵⁵

Martyrius's emphasis in this citation on the need for a pure, attentive heart from which to offer silent prayer and on the inherent link between fire and the Holy Spirit as it

²⁵² LG 7.4, in Brock (1987), p. 50.

²⁵³ Brock (2006), pp. 240-242.

²⁵⁴ Brock (1987), pp. 199-200.

²⁵⁵ Martyrius, BP 8.20, in Brock (1987), pp. 210-211.

descends onto the interior offering establishes his commitment to the interiorization of the biblical temple motif. His interest in this image is further suggested by his reference to hidden mysteries which are revealed to the heart and which Martyrius is unable to disclose. Is the author referring to the heavenly liturgy which the angels celebrate before the throne of God? Does Martyrius follow Aphrahat's lead by conceiving of the heart as a place of unspeakable splendor where worthy Christians join members of the heavenly church in their praise of Divinity? Does the celebration of the interior liturgy of the heart allow for the transcendence of human limitations and for participation in divine life? The following passage suggests as much:

In the boundlessness of his Being he is everything, for he is not far away from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being; and while he is in us and in everything, he exists in the majestic glory of his divinity and in his utter exaltedness. His creation is full of the splendour of his glory: the seraphs of fire stand there to honour him, the ranks of the many-eyed cherubim escort His majesty Being, the bands of spiritual powers dash around ministering to him, the throngs of angels fly hither and thither with their wings, and all the orders of spiritual beings serve his Being in awe, crying 'Holy' in trembling and love, as they cover their faces with their wings at the splendour of his great and fearful radiance, ceaselessly crying out to one another the threefold sanctification of his exalted glory, saying 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord Almighty, with whose glories both heaven and earth are full.'²⁵⁶

The above words bear great resemblance to Aphrahat's description of the glorified sage who participates in the angelic liturgy. Like his predecessor, Martyrius points to the heart as a sacred space where members of the earthly church are granted access to the joys and glories of the heavenly church. Here, temporal barriers cease to exist. Close relations with God and the angels become a distinct possibility. In the heart, the worthy touch on eternal life.

For Martyrius, as for Aphrahat before him, the interior liturgical celebration is inherently relational. On the one hand, it allows for the deepening of divine-human

²⁵⁶ Martyrius, *BP* 8:6-7, in Brock (1987), pp. 204-205.

relations. But it also fosters human-to-human exchanges in that Christians cannot hope to regain a measure of Adam's original angelic state unless they overcome self-interest, separation, and discord.²⁵⁷ By insisting that the quest for perfection is always a communal affair and by taking as its model the eschatological messianic community, Martyrius upholds the idea so prevalent in Syrian Christian thought that the community of the church foreshadows the heavenly community, provided it fosters caring interpersonal exchanges and strives to transcend human divisions. In this respect, Martyrius's doctrine of inner prayer is as invested as Aphrahat's teaching in the communal dimension of the mystical life. While prayer of the heart allows for very personal, intimate relations with God, the deepening of these relations hinges at all times on the continuous reaching out to the neighbor.

In the hope of drawing further attention to the idea that members of the early Syrian church, despite their concern to spiritualize the celebration of the liturgy, never called into question the communal nature of Christian worship and looked to inner prayer as an important means of engaging more fully with the world rather than withdrawing from it, let us now turn our attention to the late seventh century and to the work of Isaac of Nineveh, a highly influential mystical writer, who continued the tradition of referring to the heart as an interior altar from which Christians offer up their pure prayer. Let us consider to how great a degree he emphasized the liturgical context of inner prayer and, by doing so, suggested the inherently communal nature of this transformative practice. Was Isaac as insistent as his predecessors that silent prayer and social philanthropy are but two sides of the same coin?

²⁵⁷ Brown (1988), pp. 334-335.

Like earlier theologians of the Syrian church, Isaac paid close attention to biblical anthropological teaching and made ample use of its heart language. However, having been exposed to the writings of the Greek fathers which, by the seventh century, had been translated into Syriac, he simultaneously drew on Christianity's Hellenic heritage, in particular on the Evagrian idea of the ascent of the *nous* into imageless prayer, to articulate his mystical teaching. Hence, he formulated a doctrine that combines Greek concepts with the biblically rooted Syrian doctrine of the pure heart.²⁵⁸

Isaac presents two prominent aspects of his teachings, i.e. the notion that only pure prayer is acceptable to God and the concept of the heart as the Lord's altar, in the following passage:

Prayer's purity or lack of purity consists in the following. If, at the times when the mind invites one of these stirrings we have specified to offer a sacrifice, it mingles in this sacrifice some alien thought or distraction, then it is called impure, seeing that it has placed on the Lord's altar—that is, the heart, the spiritual pillar—one of the animals that is not permitted.²⁵⁹

The idea of the heart as an interior altar which, in itself, suggests a liturgical reading of inner prayer is reinforced in a subsequent passage in which Isaac relates prayer explicitly to the Eucharist and the descent of the Spirit onto the elements:

But it is particularly at the time of prayer that the gaze is fixed upon God, and the entire momentum of its movement is stretched out toward him, as it offers to him supplications from the heart with an impelling and fervent intensity. For this reason it is appropriate that divine grace should spring up just at the moment when a single thought occupies the soul. For we can see the same thing with the gift of the Spirit upon the visible Offering we make. When everyone is standing in prayer in readiness, making earnest supplication, with the intellect concentrated on God, it is then that the Spirit descends upon the Bread and Wine that are laid upon the altar.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ McGuckin (1999), p. 98.

²⁵⁹ Isaac of Nineveh, *Disc 22* (part II), in Brock (1987), p. 256.

²⁶⁰ Isaac of Nineveh, *Disc 22* (part II), in Brock (1987), p. 261. Isaac's reference in the above words to the intellect's rather than the heart's concentration on God need not perplex us if we bear in mind that he points to the mind as one of the heart's inner senses. See, for instance, Isaac's *Hom 3* in which he suggests that "purity of mind is one thing and purity of heart is another, just as a limb differs from the whole body;" in *Isaac of Nineveh: Ascetical Homilies*, trans. Fr. Mamas (David Miller) of the Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), p. 21. For a discussion of this feature see

Once again, we are in the presence of an early Christian theologian who pays close attention to the reinterpretation of the temple motif. Taking the public celebration of the Eucharist as his frame of reference, Isaac interiorizes this event and situates it in the human heart. Like the Eucharist, genuine inner prayer allows the faithful to become members of the heavenly church and to touch upon eternal life in the here and now. Isaac deepens his spiritual interpretation of the temple motif in a subsequent passage in which he provides his audience not only with a description of the Old Testament temple but likens the saint's entry into the heart at the time of prayer to the entrance of the high priest into the inner sanctuary.²⁶¹ The high priest as well as the practitioner of inner prayer are permitted to witness divine, ineffable mysteries. On both occasions, humans enter the heavenly realm and have direct access to God.

While Isaac does not associate fire directly with the Eucharistic celebration around the altar of the heart, the motif is not absent from his writings. Two instances in which he employs the image are of particular interest within the present context. Let us consider them in turn:

Many of the early Fathers . . . did not even know the psalms, yet their prayer ascended to God like fire, as a result of their excellent ways and the humility of mind which they had acquired.²⁶²

The love of God is fiery by nature and when it descends in an extraordinary degree on to a person it throws that soul into ecstasy. And so, the heart of the person who has experienced this love cannot contain it or endure it without unusual changes being seen . . . the face becomes lit up, full of joy; the body becomes heated; fear and shame depart from such a person who thus becomes like an ecstatic.²⁶³

McGuckin (1999), p. 99. This conception of the mind also explains Isaac's alternate use of the expressions 'humility of mind' and 'humility of heart.'

²⁶¹ Isaac of Nineveh, *Disc 22* (part II), in Brock (1987), p. 261.

²⁶² Isaac of Nineveh, *Texts On Prayer And Outward Posture During Prayer* 19, in Brock (1987), p. 290.

²⁶³ Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom 35*, in Mamas (1984), p. 158.

In both of the above citations, Isaac associates the motif of consuming fire with inner purity and pure prayer. The first citation is of interest for noting the superior conduct displayed by the early fathers and the resultant power of their prayer. It raises the question what some of their excellent ways may have been. Did they heed the advice of earlier Syrian writers and display love of one's neighbor?²⁶⁴ Did they seek to emulate the equality of the heavenly realm by overcoming human barriers? Isaac suggests as much in the following words:

Let this be for you a luminous sign that your soul has reached limpid²⁶⁵ purity: when after thoroughly testing yourself, you find that you are full of mercy for all humankind, and that your heart is afflicted by the intensity of your pity for people, and burns like a fire, without making distinctions between people.²⁶⁶

Like earlier members of the Syrian church, Isaac does not separate silent, inner prayer from charitable deeds. God accepts the sacrifice of pure prayer because individuals adopt an attitude of mercy and love toward fellow-humans. This attitude reflects the conduct of the angels and allows Christians to attain, even in this lifetime, to a state of purity and perfection known prior to the fall and to be re-experienced in its fullness in the life to come. The more the worthy purify their hearts, that is, the greater their commitment to the cultivation of caring and charitable relations with fellow-beings, the more they become aware of God's all-pervasive presence and of the heavenly Kingdom that abides within them:

Behold, heaven is within you (if you are indeed pure) and within it you will see the angels in their light and their Master with them, and in them.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 52, in Mamas (1984), p. 257.

²⁶⁵ The concept of limpidity is closely related to the notion of purification. While some authors refer to purity of heart, other writers may employ the term *shafyūlā lebbā*, that is, "limpidity, lucidity, luminosity, clarity, purity, transparency, serenity, or sincerity of heart," Brock (1987), p. xxviii. As pointed out by Brock, no single English word does justice to the connotations of the Syriac expression.

²⁶⁶ Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 3 (of Appendix), in Mamas (1984), p. 392.

²⁶⁷ Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 15, in Mamas (1984), p. 84.

If we now turn our attention to the second of the above citations, we can establish that the sacrifice of pure prayer changes not only relations with fellow-humans, the angels, and God, but has a lasting impact also on the body. As suggested by Isaac's words on the fiery nature of God's love and on the many physical changes it effects in humans, such as the lighting up of the face, the pouring in of joy, the generation of heat, and the disappearance of fear and shame, divine love manifests itself vividly on a physical level. The revelation of God's presence in the heart is a deeply felt experience which Isaac describes as an "inevitable sensation."²⁶⁸ Where intellectual inquiry fails, bodily sensation reveals the wholly transcendent and incomprehensible God. Through somatic awareness, humans perceive the inner workings of divine grace and, in the absence of rational evidence, experience God's abiding presence viscerally.

Isaac's emphasis on the importance of the body as an instrument of divine apprehension calls to mind the teaching of his fourth century predecessor Ephrem. For him, as for Ephrem, the discernment of God depends on our embodied existence. Without the body, humans are unable to feel the movement of Divinity to take possession of the human heart. According to both Syrian fathers, withdrawal into the secret chamber of the heart and the silent conversing with God never calls into question the importance of physical existence. On the contrary, attentiveness to the body and the ability to increase its vitality and alertness allows humans to fine-tune their God-given instrument of mystical ascent. By heeding their bodies, they are better equipped to touch upon God in their hearts and to affect the lives of fellow-beings.

²⁶⁸ Isaac of Nineveh, *Hom* 68, in Mamas (1984), pp. 332-333.

Having ventured into the seventh century so as to trace and explore more fully the degree to which the interiorization of the biblical temple motif shaped the Syrian doctrine of inner prayer, we are now in a better position to discern the commitment of Syrian ascetics to the idea that the spiritual glorification of God was less a matter of withdrawing into the inner self but rather, and perhaps paradoxically so, a matter of turning outward and extending a helping hand to fellow-beings. While concentrated silent prayer was no doubt a vital part of the mystical life, many Syrian fathers viewed this practice as inseparably linked to charitable conduct and active involvement in the Christian community. They all looked to deeds of goodwill as the quintessential means of attaining perfection and of drawing close to God. Social philanthropy and inner prayer were, ultimately, one and the same.

In our exploration of prominent early Syrian fathers, we have also had the opportunity to witness their high regard for the body. For Ephrem and Isaac in particular, the body was a vital tool of mystical ascent. The body allowed Christians to follow the teaching of the *Īhīdāyā* and to imitate his many charitable deeds. Embodied existence enabled them to be present to the world, to establish meaningful relationships, and, by doing so, to invite greater intimacy with God. For Ephrem and Isaac, somatic experience was an important means of entering ever more fully into the presence of God and of knowing the Ineffable despite the limitations of human comprehension. Sensory perception taught humans that Divinity can be experienced, even if they lacked the means of articulating this experience.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹ Ashbrook Harvey (2006), p. 175.

If Isaac benefited from the teaching of his fourth century predecessors three hundred years after its recording, so can we. Given the body- and community-centered approach of the early Syrian doctrine of prayer, it promises to speak to all modern individuals who look beyond the heart-mind divide so characteristic of our time to the body and its intuitive wisdom as a vital means of reconnecting with their divine source of being and of rediscovering a deeper sense of purpose. The body- and community-centered approach of the ancient practice of inner prayer is ideally suited to address the concerns and spiritual needs of a generation that no longer conceives of the universe as a perfectly ordered and minutely compartmentalized mechanism but has embraced a view according to which a macrocosmic movement of energy connects all things,²⁷⁰ not least the body and the soul, the individual and the community. The emphasis that early Christians placed on the body as a unique tool of divine apprehension and on relationality as a primary means of touching upon God speaks to all contemporary religious seekers who long for participatory knowledge of Divinity and who wish to experience such knowledge by paying close attention to expressions of the divine in themselves, in their neighbor, and in the world at large. It promises to speak to all individuals who believe that it is possible to perceive the divine life that suffuses every facet of human existence while engaged in the turmoil of everyday existence.

With the above comments in mind, let us now retrace our steps and return to the late fourth century to consider one further Syrian theologian who was instrumental to the shaping of the ancient doctrine of the prayer of the heart. Let us turn to the writings of

²⁷⁰ Lynne McTaggart, *The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 134.

Pseudo-Macarius and examine the degree to which this early Christian writer relied on biblical anthropology, its heart language, and its temple imagery to provide posterity with a teaching on inner prayer that focuses on the immediate apprehension of Divinity in the materially-rooted consciousness and on the heart as the locus of God's revelation to humankind. Let us consider the degree to which Macarius emphasized the liturgical conception of inner prayer and, by doing so, embraced the relational nature of the ascetical life. Let us also give thought to his views on embodiment and to the degree to which he advanced the incarnational spirit of the Syrian church by pointing to the body as a vital means of imitating Christ and of transcending human strife through love in action.

Macarius

The author of the Macarian corpus is a mysterious figure. While scholars are fairly certain that he wrote in the latter half of the fourth century and that his œuvre entails the traditional *Fifty Spiritual Homilies*, a number of additional homilies, various sayings, and several letters including the *Great Letter*, they continue to puzzle over his identity.²⁷¹ The difficulty of establishing the author of these texts lies primarily in the fact that a number of noted figures by the name of Macarius wrote in the fourth century. The writer of the collection could have been Macarius Magnes (c. 400), the bishop of Magnesia, who authored a five-volume work called the *Apocriticus*.²⁷² Then again, he could have been the great desert father Macarius of Alexandria (c. 295-394), who served the monastic communities of Kellia. Some scholars have identified the author with a Messalian by the name of Symeon of Mesopotamia to whom some of the Macarian manuscripts attribute authorship.²⁷³ But the most likely explanation is that the set of texts was relocated under the name of Macarius of Egypt (c. 300-390), the renowned founder and spiritual director of the monastic colonies in the desert of Scetis, a relocation that must have been considered necessary by contemporary ascetics who deemed the highly practical

²⁷¹ For a detailed discussion of the Macarian manuscripts and their history see Maloney (1992), p. 4; Plested (2004), pp. 9-12.

²⁷² See Maloney (1992), p. 6.

²⁷³ Hermann Dörries, *Symeon von Mesopotamien. Die Ueberlieferung der Messalianischen Makarios-Schriften* (Berlin; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1941).

teachings presented in these texts too valuable to fall victim to the growing criticism of their presumably heretical nature.²⁷⁴

This brings us to a further matter of much scholarly debate. Just how closely associated was the author of the Macarian corpus with the Messalian movement, a heretical sect of Syrian origin condemned by the Council of Ephesus I (431) for certain excesses in its ascetical doctrine and for the claim that the sacramental ordinances of the church were not sufficient to sustain the Christian life but needed to be complemented by experiential prayer.²⁷⁵ Scholars have pondered whether the author of these writings was a Messalian, given the close relationship between the *Asketikon* of the Messalians and the Macarian writings.²⁷⁶ Or was he an anti-Messalian who drew on common ascetical ideas of his time, moderating excessive tendencies?²⁷⁷ While the latter interpretation is more plausible and continues to gain in support, evidence regarding the author's Messalian affiliation remains inconclusive. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the label 'Messalian' describes not one specific school of thought but covers a variety of ancient Syriac ascetical groups which, while sharing an emphasis on religious experience, appear

²⁷⁴ Macarius of Egypt was certainly not the author of these texts, which are of a Syrian rather than an Egyptian background. Neither was the renowned desert father prolific enough a writer to account for so extensive a corpus; see Maloney (1992), p. 6; Plested (2004), p. 13.

²⁷⁵ The term 'Messalian' derives from the Syriac verb *sl'*, which in the pa'el conjugation (*sallī*) can mean 'to pray,' and, hence, designates 'those who pray.' For a detailed study of the Messalian-Macarian connection see Columba Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts, and Language to AD 431* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

²⁷⁶ In 1920, Villecourt pointed to pronounced similarities between themes presented in the *Asketikon* and the Macarian corpus. Thereafter, it was generally accepted that Macarius was a Messalian.

²⁷⁷ J. Meyendorff, "Messalianism or Anti-Messalianism? A Fresh Look at the 'Macarian' Problem," in *Kyriakon*, Festschrift in Honor of Johannes Quasten, vol. 2 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), pp. 585-590. Within this context, it is of interest to note that Dörries, who situates the author of the texts firmly in a Messalian milieu in his earlier work, does not maintain this position in his later work, see Hermann Dörries, *Die Theologie des Makarios/Symeon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).

to have differed in their teaching on the sacraments, on ecclesiastical structures, and on hierarchical authority.²⁷⁸

Yet despite these complications, it is now generally acknowledged that Macarius-Symeon or Pseudo-Macarius, as the author is commonly referred to, was at home in a Syrian rather than an Egyptian milieu. Based on internal evidence and on the observation that the Macarian corpus bears the mark of Syrian Christian literature—as we will see shortly, the author's extensive use of symbolic language and heart imagery is strongly reminiscent of Aphrahat and Ephrem, Pseudo-Macarius is assumed to have been an ascetic who lived in northeast Syria.²⁷⁹ Recent findings suggest that he was familiar with certain apocrypha of Syrian origin, most notably the Acts and the Gospel of Thomas. Further proof of the author's Oriental Christian background is provided by his scriptural writings which call to mind, among others, the *Diatessaron*, the standard text of the Gospels used in Syriac-speaking churches down to the fifth century.²⁸⁰

This being said, it is important to note that Macarius²⁸¹ was no stranger to the Hellenic Christian tradition. He wrote Greek easily and correctly. Since his œuvre reveals familiarity with the workings of an imperial palace, the structures of civil administration, as well as the Roman educational system and its law, he is assumed to have been a citizen of Rome.²⁸² It is also important to note that aspects of his thought are reminiscent of the Alexandrian theological tradition and suggest a Platonic influence, a feature we will address more fully toward the end of this section.

²⁷⁸ Stewart (1991), p. 235.

²⁷⁹ Maloney (1992), p. 7.

²⁸⁰ For more details on this matter, including geographical references that situate the author within northeast Syria, see Maloney (1992), pp. 7-8; Plested (2004), pp. 12-16.

²⁸¹ We will henceforth dispense of the 'pseudo' which was introduced to indicate the pseudonymous way in which the writings were preserved.

²⁸² Plested (2004), p. 15.

Let us begin our discussion of Macarius's contributions to the prayer of the heart tradition by taking a closer look at his anthropological teaching. Like his Syrian predecessors, Macarius was deeply committed to biblical anthropology and to the unique position scriptural teaching accords to the heart. Time and again, his writings bear witness to the idea that the heart is not merely the seat of human emotion but of all intellectual, volutative, moral, and spiritual function. For Macarius, as for Aphrahat and Ephrem before him, the heart is the innermost region of a person. Its longings, intentions, and perceptions dictate our entire existence. It defines who we truly are:

For it says: "Where your heart is, there also is your treasure" (Mt 6:21; Lk 12:34). For to whatever thing one's heart is tied and where his desire draws him, that is his God. If the heart always desires God, he is Lord of his heart.²⁸³

Following biblical teaching, Macarius views the heart as the locus of self-transcendence. Like an opening in the firmament through which sparklings of supernatural light may be glimpsed,²⁸⁴ the heart provides an opening through which divine grace pours into a person. It is the place where the material and the immaterial, the created and the uncreated, converge. It is the meeting-ground between God and the individual.²⁸⁵

If the heart provides access to God, it also brings humans into direct contact with evil. Macarius is insistent on this point. While it is by way of the heart that divine grace pours into humans and permeates their entire being, it is also by way of the heart that sin

²⁸³ Macarius, *Hom II.43.3*, in Maloney (1992), p. 220.

²⁸⁴ Jean Borella, *The Secret of the Christian Way* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 110.

²⁸⁵ Kallistos Ware, "Preface," in Maloney (1992), p. xvi.

takes hold of our inner selves and infiltrates all members of the body.²⁸⁶ For Macarius, the heart is simultaneously home to justice and injustice, life and death, grace and sin.²⁸⁷

Here, God and Satan co-exist:

And the heart itself is but a small vessel, yet there also are dragons and there are lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. And there are rough and uneven roads; there are precipices. But there is also God, also the angels, the life and the kingdom, the light and the Apostles, the treasures of grace—there are all things.²⁸⁸

Macarius presents the heart as an apocalyptic arena where the cosmic struggle between good and evil is played out on an interior landscape.²⁸⁹ If Christians wish to free their deepest selves from the many impurities to which the persistent onslaught of demonic forces give rise, they have to take up arms and engage in continuous spiritual warfare. Like athletes or combatants,²⁹⁰ they are called upon to be ever-vigilant and to guard the heart against all defilement; they have to “run the race in the arena of this world with alertness and exactitude.”²⁹¹ Most importantly, Christians have to pray without ceasing, loving “the Lord, not only when he enters into the place of prayer, but in walking and talking and eating.”²⁹²

For Macarius, prayer is the beginning of every good endeavour and an all-important weapon in the battle against evil. It is an inner offering by means of which worthy Christians beseech God to be released from the deceits of the world and to be filled with the Holy Spirit.²⁹³ Concentrated interior prayer allows them to open themselves to the presence of Divinity and to await its coming with patience and hope. In

²⁸⁶ Macarius, *Hom* II.15.21, in Maloney (1992), p. 116.

²⁸⁷ Ware, “Preface,” in Maloney (1992), pp. xv-xvi.

²⁸⁸ Macarius, *Hom* II.43.7, in Maloney (1992), p. 222.

²⁸⁹ Alexander Golitzin, “Temple and Throne of the Divine Glory,” pp. 107-129, in Luckman and Kulzer (1999), p. 125; McGuckin (1999), p. 94.

²⁹⁰ For Macarius’s use of this imagery see, for instance, *Hom* II.26.12, in Maloney (1992), p. 168.

²⁹¹ Macarius, *Hom* II.4, in Maloney (1992), p. 50.

²⁹² Macarius, *Hom* II.43.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 220.

²⁹³ Macarius, *Hom* II.37.7, in Maloney (1992), p. 209.

time, God may offer divine instruction and illuminate their innermost selves with divine light:

We ought to pray, not according to any bodily habit nor with a habit of loud noise out of a custom of silence or on bended knees. But we ought soberly to have an attentive mind,²⁹⁴ waiting expectantly on God until he comes and visits the soul by means of all of its openings and its paths and senses. And so we should be silent when we ought, and to pray with a cry And thus he will enlighten, teaching one how to ask, giving pure prayer that is spiritual and worthy of God and bestowing the gift of worship "in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24).²⁹⁵

In his teaching on inner prayer, Macarius pays close attention to the workings of the Spirit in the heart. We pray because we "seek to receive the true, heavenly bread to strengthen our souls, and heavenly garments of light and the spiritual shoes of the Spirit."²⁹⁶ Guided by his understanding that the battle of evil depends on the interplay of human effort and divine grace, Macarius conceives of the Holy Spirit as a heavenly lamp or a shining Sun of justice which illuminates the heart of the faithful.²⁹⁷ While the Holy Spirit is received by all Christians in baptism, it shines more brightly in individuals who are progressing along the path of prayer and virtue.²⁹⁸ In them, the Spirit enkindles the light of the Godhead in much the same way in which it once set on fire the heart of Christ, illuminating his humanity.²⁹⁹ The Holy Spirit pierces the individual with a desire for Christ and a longing to enjoy God more fully.

If Macarius presents an ascetical doctrine that pays close attention to the inner workings of the Holy Spirit, he is equally concerned to convey his deeply Christocentric

²⁹⁴ As we will discuss shortly, Macarius places the mind within the heart.

²⁹⁵ Macarius, *Hom II.33.1-2*, in Maloney (1992), pp. 201.

²⁹⁶ Macarius, *Hom III.16.7-8*, in *Neue Homilien des Makarius/Symeon*, ed. Erich Kostermann and Heinz Berthold (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), cited in Tugwell (1985), p. 52.

²⁹⁷ Macarius, *Hom II.11.3-4*, in Maloney (1992), pp. 91-92.

²⁹⁸ Tugwell (1985), p. 48.

²⁹⁹ Macarius, *Hom II.43.2*, in Maloney (1992), p. 219.

outlook.³⁰⁰ For him, the incarnation irrevocably altered the human condition. With the Christ event, the heart ceased to be the sole domain of evil and was introduced to light, life, and the treasures of grace.³⁰¹

Just as the farmer, when he girds himself to cultivate the soil, must take the tools and clothing for cultivation, so Christ the King, the heavenly and true cultivator, when he came to humanity made barren by evil, put on the body and carried the cross as his tool and worked the barren soul and removed from it the thorns and thistles of evil spirits and pulled up the weeds of sin and burned up with fire every weed of its sins. And in this way he cultivated it with the wood of the cross and planted in it the most beautiful paradise of the Spirit, bearing every fruit that is sweet and delectable to God as its owner.³⁰²

For Macarius, the incarnation is the supreme act of grace. It is the highpoint of human history through which Divinity has revealed itself to the created order and redeemed humankind in the person of Jesus Christ.³⁰³ By becoming enfleshed, Christ paved the way for our sanctification and participation in divine nature. He “came and suffered the ignominy of the cross and endured death . . . so that he might beget from himself and his very own nature children of the Spirit.”³⁰⁴ Macarius conceives of our deification primarily in terms of light:³⁰⁵

That the souls of the just become heavenly light, the Lord himself has told his Apostles: “You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:14). For he himself, who first transformed them into light, has ordered and commanded them to be light to the world.³⁰⁶

The idea that the worthy undergo a light-filled transformation and reflect the glory of Divinity is at the heart of Macarius’s ascetical teaching and exerted a profound influence on subsequent Christian theologians, including Maximus the Confessor,

³⁰⁰ Plested (2004), p. 43.

³⁰¹ Macarius, *Hom II.43.7*, in Maloney (1992), p. 222.

³⁰² Macarius, *Hom II.28.3*, in Maloney (1992), p. 185.

³⁰³ Maloney (1992), pp. 19-20.

³⁰⁴ Macarius, *Hom II.30.2*, in Maloney (1992), p. 190.

³⁰⁵ Louth (1981), pp. 122-123.

³⁰⁶ Macarius, *Hom II.1.4*, in Maloney (1992), p. 39.

Symeon the New Theologian, and the fourteenth-century hesychasts.³⁰⁷ We will consider his theology of divine light more closely in a moment. Before we do so, let us conclude this opening discussion of Macarius's theology with some further remarks on his anthropological teaching.

As suggested above, Macarius's work is indebted, first and foremost, to the biblically rooted Syrian doctrine of the pure heart which views the latter as the symbol of our personal unity. The heart is the meeting-point between the body and the soul, between the material and spiritual realms. Given this holistic biblical outlook, there is little room in his doctrine for dichotomous thinking. For Macarius, heart and mind are not antithetical. On the contrary, he proposes that humans think with their heart: "For there, in the heart, the mind abides as well as all the thoughts of the soul and all its hopes. This is how grace penetrates throughout all parts of the body."³⁰⁸ The heart governs the entire organism because it bears within itself the *nous*, the mind, its constant source of guidance and a captain who "tests the thoughts that accuse and defend."³⁰⁹ The following passage elucidates Macarius's understanding of the mind. In it, he portrays the *nous* as the eye of the heart:³¹⁰

There is the example of the eye, little in comparison to all the members of the body and the pupil itself is small, yet it is a great vessel. For it sees in one flash the sky, stars, sun, moon, cities, and other creatures. Likewise, these things are seen in one flash, they are formed and imaged in the small pupil of the eye. So it is with the mind toward the heart.³¹¹

³⁰⁷ Plested (2004), p. 222.

³⁰⁸ Macarius, *Hom II.15.20*, in Maloney (1992), p. 116.

³⁰⁹ Macarius, *Hom II.15.33*, in Maloney (1992), p. 121.

³¹⁰ In other instances, Macarius speaks of the 'eyes of the soul,' a reference that invites comparison with the spiritual senses of Origen: "Indeed, Christ is hidden from the eyes of men. Only with the eyes of the soul is he truly seen, until the day of resurrection, when even the body itself will reign with the soul, which now, having attained the Kingdom of Christ, rests and is illuminated by the divine life," *Hom II:2 5*, in Maloney (1992), pp. 46-47. See also *Hom II.1.2*, in Maloney (1992), pp. 37-38.

³¹¹ Macarius, *Hom II.43.7*, in Maloney (1992), pp. 221-222.

Although Macarius carefully defines the intellect and the heart and has a clear sense of their relationship, he distinguishes between them only occasionally and, more often, uses the two terms interchangeably to denote the 'inner man.'³¹² In some instances, he may also employ the term *psyche*, soul, to designate this interior dimension, using the term as yet another rough equivalent of *kardia*.

Like his explication of the terms heart and intellect, Macarius's definition of *psyche* is carefully thought through, even if he does not apply the term in a consistent manner. Macarius conceives of the soul in terms of its four ruling faculties, the will, the conscience, the intellect, and the capacity to love. These faculties, he suggests, direct the soul; in them, God resides.³¹³ The soul is the locale of the image of God which Christ paints in all who direct their whole attention toward the divine Painter:

If anyone, therefore, does not continually gaze at him, overlooking all else, the Lord will not paint his image with his own light.³¹⁴

The Macarian understanding that the soul harbors God's image and serves as the dwelling-place of Divinity invites comparison with the heart as the divine abode and allows us to see how closely Macarius associates the heart and the soul. The compatibility of these faculties and of the mind is well illustrated in the following words:

He [the prince of evil] shakes the entire human race on the face of the earth. He tosses them about to and fro with restless thoughts. He entices the hearts (*kardias*) of people with the pleasures of the world. He fills every soul (*psychen*) with a dark ignorance, blindness, and forgetfulness. Only those escape him who have been reborn from above and have been transported in mind and heart (*nou*) to another world, as it was said: "Our citizenship is in Heaven" (Phil 3:20).³¹⁵

³¹² Golitzin (2002), pp. 129-156.

³¹³ Macarius, *Hom* II.1.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 38.

³¹⁴ Macarius, *Hom* II.30.4, in Maloney (1992), p. 191.

³¹⁵ Macarius, *Hom* II.5.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 64.

According to Macarius, *kardia*, *nous*, and *psyche* all seek to denote the most essential aspect of human nature. Each term suggests our inherent link with the supernatural realm and our potential to enter into close communion with God. No doubt, Macarius pays particular attention to the biblical notion of the heart. Nevertheless, the fact that he draws on a variety of terms to designate a person's deepest self cautions us not to focus too much on the presumably 'affective' nature of his teaching and, by doing so, to ignore his interest in all aspects of human existence, including the intellective. His interchangeable use of the various terms cautions us be wary of claims proposing that the Evagrian *nous* and the Macarian *kardia* represent incompatible categories which give rise to two distinct schools of early Christian mystical thought.³¹⁶ Let us reiterate that the division between the 'affective' and 'intellective' traditions is an invention of twentieth century scholars. It is not a categorization with which early Christians were familiar.

In the hope of better understanding how Macarius helped to shape the doctrine of the prayer of the heart, we will now consider the interiorization of the biblical temple motif in his œuvre and the close association he establishes between this feature and his theology of divine light. Let us begin this discussion by reiterating that Macarius, like earlier Syrian writers, places great emphasis on purity of heart. He is ever-concerned to impress upon his audience the need to heed God's laws interiorly and makes his point by citing Paul's admonition to "wash your heart from any trace of a bad conscience (Heb 10:22)."³¹⁷ Macarius is adamant that a person's observance of the law has to go deeper than that of the Pharisees and the Scribes who, blinded in their understanding, thought it

³¹⁶ Golitzin (1999), p. 123, n. 76.

³¹⁷ Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 254.

sufficient to wash only the exterior part of the vessel.³¹⁸ If Christians wish to attract the Holy Spirit and to serve as God's temple, it is essential that they cleanse the inner vessel of the heart.³¹⁹

Like his concern for purity of heart, Macarius's frequent use of the fire motif, especially to symbolize the Holy Spirit, invites comparison with earlier Syrian writings. Bearing in mind our previous discussion of this motif, we may wonder if Macarius employs fire imagery to situate prayer within a liturgical context. Is he concerned to present the heart as an interior altar onto which the Spirit descends at the epiclesis to consume the pure sacrifice? Is he as committed as Aphrahat to the spiritualization of the biblical temple motif?

Like Aphrahat, Macarius portrays the purified heart as a place of great splendor. It is the palace (*palation*) of Christ which, if repaired and rebuilt, provides rest to the King with his angels and spirits.³²⁰ The pure heart is like a holy city (*polis*), ever at peace, and filled with heavenly riches.³²¹ It is an inner temple (*naos*), a church (*ekklesia*), a throne (*thronos*), an altar (*thysiasterion*), and a tabernacle (*skene*).³²² All of these descriptions are rich in liturgical connotation and strongly suggest Macarius's intention to reconceptualize the temple motif. For him as for Aphrahat, the heart is a place of inner, liturgical celebration. Here, Christians glorify God and come face to face with the radiance of Divinity. Macarius is emphatic that the glory of God which appeared to Israel on Sinai (Ex 19, 24, 33-34), came to dwell in a special way in the sanctuary of the Jerusalem Temple (1 Kings 8), and, in Christ, came veiled in flesh, now manifests itself

³¹⁸ Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 255.

³¹⁹ Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 269.

³²⁰ Macarius, *Hom* II.15.33, in Maloney (1992), p. 120.

³²¹ Macarius, *Hom* II.11.15, in Maloney (1992), p. 97.

³²² Golitzin (1999), p. 121, n. 69.

in the hearts of worthy Christians. Through the gift of grace, Christ's followers become places of divine theophany and indwelling:³²³

Moses, having been clothed in the flesh, was unable to enter into the heart and take away the sordid garments of darkness. But only spirit from Spirit and fire from Fire dissolves the power of evil darkness. Circumcision, in the shadow of the Law, shows the coming of the true circumcision of the heart. The baptism of the Law is a shadow of the true things to come. For that baptism washed the body, but here a baptism of Fire and Spirit purifies and washes clean the polluted mind. There the priest, "covered with infirmity" (Heb 5:2), entered into the Holy of Holies to offer sacrifice for himself and the people. Here the true High Priest, Christ, once and for all entered into the tabernacle, not made by hands, and the altar above, ready to purify those who beseech him and the conscience that has been sullied. For he says, "I will be with you even to the consummation of the world" (Mt 28:20).³²⁴

According to Macarius, the heart is the new temple of Christ which, if cleansed by the devouring fire of the Spirit, is fit to serve as the High Priest's permanent abode. The motif of fire, which is prominent in the above words, features also in the following passage. Again, it serves to highlight the sacramental nature of inner prayer:

Let us, therefore, take this body and make an altar of sacrifice, and let us place on it all our desires and let us beg the Lord that he would send down from Heaven the invisible and mighty fire and consume the altar and everything on it.³²⁵

Macarius's debt to Old Testament accounts of sacrificial offerings and their consummation by divine fire is unmistakable. Unmistakable, too, is his wish to reconceptualize biblical sacrifices in terms of spiritual offerings presented to God in the heart. The follower of Christ is the true altar and the living sacrifice.³²⁶ Similar to the high priest on the occasion of his yearly entry into the holy of holies, baptized Christians glorify God and invoke the descent of heavenly fire by presenting their pure hearts. The Eucharistic context of Macarius's teaching is ever apparent:

³²³ Golitzin (1999), pp. 122-123.

³²⁴ Macarius, *Hom* II.32.4-5, in Maloney (1992), pp. 198-199.

³²⁵ Macarius, *Hom* II.31.5, in Maloney (1992), p. 195.

³²⁶ Macarius, *Hom* I.52.1.1, in Alexander Golitzin, "Hierarchy Versus Anarchy?" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (1994): 176.

Just as the fire which ministered on the altar of Jerusalem in the time of the captivity was buried in a hole, and that same fire, when peace came and the captives returned to their homeland, was, as it were, renewed and again functioned as it did before, so too . . . faithful souls receive in an interior way that divine and heavenly fire in this present life, and that fire fashions a heavenly image upon their human nature."³²⁷

If the use of the fire motif is one way by means of which Macarius reconceptualizes the Eucharist in terms of an inner, spiritual celebration, he does so also by making repeated use of the term *metabole*, 'change,' a term traditionally associated with the liturgical assembly and the mysterious transformation of the sacramental elements.³²⁸ Macarius applies this expression to the transformation of our deepest selves and suggests that just as the elements are changed through the action of the Holy Spirit on the altar of the church, so the 'inner man' is changed on the altar of the heart:

The believer should beg God to be transformed in his deliberation by a change of heart, to be transformed (*metabole*) from bitterness into sweetness.³²⁹

Alluding to the feeding of the five thousand, a gospel narrative with pronounced Eucharistic undertones, Macarius again employs *metabole* to suggest a link between the change of bread and wine and our inner transformation:³³⁰

For he who changed (*metabalon*) the nature of five loaves into the nature of the multitude . . . is able also to change (*metabalein*) the soul that was barren and savage from sin to his own goodness and kindness and peace by the holy and good "Spirit of promise" (Eph 1:13).³³¹

The idea that Macarius likens our change of heart to the consecration of the elements is particularly pronounced in his fifty-second Homily, a text in which he fully develops the theme of our innermost self as a microcosm of the church, the macrocosm. He writes:

³²⁷ Macarius, *Hom II.11.1-2*, in Maloney (1992), pp. 90-91.

³²⁸ Golitzin (1999), p. 126.

³²⁹ Macarius, *Hom II.31.1*, in Maloney (1992), p. 194.

³³⁰ Golitzin (1999), p. 126.

³³¹ Macarius, *Hom II.44.2*, in Maloney (1992), p. 223.

Thus, now as well, the Spirit of God is present with the holy Church of God and the holy altar and in all the visible arrangement. Among the worthy and the faithful It acts with different gifts, while It remains far away from the unworthy. For the living activity of the Holy Spirit is to be sought from God in living hearts, because all visible things and all the [present] arrangement passes away, but hearts alive in the Spirit will abide.³³²

In this passage, the close link between the exterior altar of the church and the interior altar of the heart is apparent indeed. Similar to the public transformation of the elements, the interior celebration of the Eucharist renders the pure in heart worthy of the Lord. It releases them from the prison of darkness and allows the divine image of the soul, God's own handiwork, to shine forth in all its splendor.³³³

Macarius's doctrine of divine light is inseparably linked to the spiritualization of the worship experience. The descent of heavenly fire into the pure heart allows for the transformation of a person into God's light-filled temple. Just as the first and second Temples were once illuminated by God's Shekinah, so worthy Christians receive the luminous presence of Divinity in their deepest selves. The heart becomes a place of unspeakably splendor; it becomes the locale where the numinous immanence of God reveals itself to the world. The transfiguration of a person's very core into the radiant throne of God is well illustrated in the following passage:

For the soul that is deemed to be judged worthy to participate in the light of the Holy Spirit by becoming his throne and habitation, and is covered with the beauty of ineffable glory of the Spirit, becomes all light, all face, all eye. There is no part of the soul that is not full of the spiritual eyes of light. That is to say, there is no part of the soul that is covered with darkness but is totally covered with spiritual eyes of light. For the soul has no imperfect part but is in every part on all sides facing forward and covered with the beauty of the ineffable glory of the light of Christ, who mounts and rides upon the soul.³³⁴

³³² Macarius, *Hom* I.52, in Golitzin (1994), p. 177.

³³³ Macarius, *Hom* II.49.5, in Maloney (1992), p. 243.

³³⁴ Macarius, *Hom* II.1.2, in Maloney (1992), p. 37.

Macarius reiterates the idea that silent prayer offered from the inner altar of the heart introduces worthy Christians to a life in grace throughout his work. To convey the light-exuding nature of this transformative process, he draws on Paul's words to the Corinthians (2 Cor 3:18) and the idea that the inner self of the faithful will be transformed into God's image from glory to glory.³³⁵ Christ, the good Portrait Painter, will reward his devout followers by painting "according to his own image a heavenly man. Out of his Spirit, out of the substance of the light itself, ineffable light, he paints a heavenly image and presents to it its noble and good Spouse."³³⁶ The sage is able to behold the glory of the Lord by entering into the heart, the place where the radiance of Divinity is reflected as though in a mirror.

Macarius deepens the discussion of his doctrine of divine light by commenting on God's light-filled revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai and by presenting this Old Testament account as a narrative that foreshadows the illumination of the worthy heart.³³⁷ Just as the Shekinah, the glory of the Lord, settled on top of Mount Sinai and manifested itself like a devouring fire in the sight of the Israelites (Ex 24:15-17), so divine fire will set ablaze the heart of the faithful and transform it into God's radiant temple. Macarius elucidates his doctrine of divine light still further by drawing on the account of the Lord's transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the quintessential account of God's glorious self-disclosure to humankind, and suggests that, like the body of the Son,

the bodies of the saints are glorified and shine like lightning. Just as the interior glory of Christ covered his body and shone completely, in the same way also in the saints the interior power of Christ in them in that day will be poured out exteriorly upon their bodies. For even now at this time they are in their minds participators of his substance and nature.³³⁸

³³⁵ Macarius, *Hom II.5.10*, in Maloney (1992), p. 74.

³³⁶ Macarius, *Hom II.30.4*, in Maloney (1992), p. 191.

³³⁷ Macarius, *Hom II.30.4*, in Maloney (1992), p. 191.

³³⁸ Macarius, *Hom II.15.38*, in Maloney (1992), p. 123.

By engaging in inner prayer and celebrating the interior liturgy, the human heart becomes a place filled with the glory of God; it becomes Christ's radiant throne. Like earlier Syrian writers, Macarius is deeply committed to the idea that a Christian life of prayer and asceticism allows for the progressive transfiguration of the worthy and a luminous encounter with God. His pronounced emphasis on the radiant nature of this encounter shaped the mystical doctrine of many later teachers. The Macarian theology of light proved particularly influential over the thought of the eleventh-century Byzantine monk Symeon the New Theologian who, many centuries later, wrote:

Then as I was meditating, Master, on these things,
suddenly You appeared from above, much greater than the sun
and You shone brilliantly from the heavens down into my heart.³³⁹

The above discussion of Macarius's wish to render prayer in terms of an inner liturgical celebration begs the question if he, like Aphrahat, emphasized the communal nature of this celebration. For Aphrahat, kind and generous behavior toward fellow-humans was the very essence of Christian existence. It was prayer itself. Ephrem, too, considered it his Christian calling to imitate Christ's many acts of love and to alleviate the suffering of his neighbors. Does Macarius follow this lead, believing that the practice of inner prayer, rather than perpetuate withdrawal from the world and the solitary encounter with God, calls for participation in the 'fellowship of the mystery' and for reconciliation with the neighbor? Does he believe that the celebration of the interior liturgy unites the faithful in much the same way in which they are united during public worship? Does the transformation of the heart into God's radiant throne depend on social philanthropy? Let

³³⁹ Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns* 25, in *Symeon the New Theologian: Hymns of Divine Love*, trans. George Maloney (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1976), p. 135.

us attempt to answer these questions in the upcoming pages. Once we have given thought to this aspect of Macarius's teaching, we will consider his conception of the human body, a teaching well worth our attention, especially if we recall his above words on the transfiguration of the saints and the body's full participation in the radiant encounter with God.

Despite his emphasis on the interior glorification of God, Macarius does not call into question the importance of public worship. Like Aphrahat and Ephrem, he subscribes to an ascetical doctrine that is deeply respectful of the church. To be sure, Macarius is concerned, first and foremost, with the religious life of the individual and with an inner transformation that owes much to the diligent adherence to silent prayer. He rarely comments on the church and expositions on the Eucharist are sparse.³⁴⁰ But when Macarius does speak of the Eucharist, he discusses it in fully traditional terms, leaving his audience in no doubt as to the importance and lasting impact of this sacrament.³⁴¹ Individuals who eat of Christ's body are made worthy to become partakers of the Holy Spirit. Those who drink of the Savior's blood are sanctified.³⁴² Despite his emphasis on the contemplative life and the inner glorification of God, Macarius does not question the validity of the church.³⁴³

³⁴⁰ Dörries (1978), p. 396.

³⁴¹ Golitzin (2002), p. 141.

³⁴² Macarius, *Hom 1.22.1.7-8*, in *Makarios/Symeon: Reden und Briefe. Die Sammlung I des Vaticanus Graecus 694 (B)*, 2 vols, ed. Heinz Berthold (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973), p. 230.

³⁴³ According to Dörries, Macarius's relationship to the church was complex. He viewed the church as inherently transient and could be outright critical of its actions. At the same time, Macarius regarded it as a divine institution, the recipient of the Holy Spirit, and, as such, deserving of respect and loyalty. Dörries proposes that this tense and ambivalent relationship does not call into question Macarius's orthodoxy but, on the contrary, indicates his commitment to the church. His criticism points to the attempt to come to terms with the church's imperfections rather than to distance himself from it. Would Macarius have grappled with ecclesiastical shortcomings if he had followed in the footsteps of heretical ascetics and broken with the church? Does his dissatisfaction not suggest that Macarius, as a member of the church, refused to take ecclesiastical policies lightly and sought to preserve their integrity? See Dörries (1978), pp. 385-397.

Neither does he negate the value of communal existence. Macarius warns fellow-ascetics who have devoted themselves to the life of inner prayer on a full-time basis not to become so absorbed in the mystical joys of the interior life as to neglect charitable service. Even Christians who are committed to the silent contemplation of God are called upon to remain active members of the community, instructing and caring for fellow-monastics.³⁴⁴ Reminiscent of Aphrahat, Macarius refuses to see any value in prayer that is offered at the expense of a person's wellbeing. If praying ascetics neglect or, still worse, disdain brethren who provide for their bodily needs, they engage in devilish rather than pure prayer.³⁴⁵ Macarius is emphatic. The Christian life depends on humility, respect, and love. Only by basing their lives on these cornerstones and creating a mutually supportive environment can humans profit from their ascetical strivings:

The brethren should conduct themselves toward one another with the greatest love, whether in praying or reading Scripture or doing any kind of work so that they may have the foundation of charity toward others. And thus their various tasks or undertakings may find approval with those who pray and those who read and those who work, all can conduct themselves toward each other in sincerity and simplicity to their mutual profit.³⁴⁶

In his insistence on love, sincerity, and equality, Macarius looks to the angelic realm as his model. The earthly community mirrors the heavenly community:

[Just] as the angels in heaven live together in accord with each other in the greatest unanimity, in peace and love, and there is no pride or envy there but they communicate in mutual love and sincerity, so in the same way the brethren should be among themselves.³⁴⁷

For Macarius, charitable conduct is at the center of the quest for God. By heeding and caring for members of the earthly church, ascetics come to participate even in this

³⁴⁴ Dörries (1978), p. 297.

³⁴⁵ Simon Tugwell, "Evagrius and Macarius," pp. 168-75, in Jones, Wainwright, and Yarnold (1986), p. 175.

³⁴⁶ Macarius, *Hom II.3.1*, in Maloney (1992), p. 47.

³⁴⁷ Macarius, *Hom II.3.1*, in Maloney (1992), p. 47.

lifetime in the heavenly church. The Eucharistic community prefigures and manifests the angelic community. It portrays how God's servants conduct themselves in the Kingdom to come, a place where all strife and fragmentation are transcended. If humans wish to transform the heart into God's temple and to participate in the heavenly glorification of Divinity, they cannot ignore the church and its communal existence. No one who does not welcome the neighbor and embrace social philanthropy can hope to discern the stirrings of divine grace in the heart.

Having established Macarius' commitment to the relational dimension of the ascetical life, a dimension that is prevalent in spite of the intensely personal nature of inner prayer, let us now consider his views on embodiment. Does he adopt a positive stance toward the body, suggesting that the mystical life bids ascetics to embrace their embodied existence rather than deny it? Is Macarius as concerned as Ephrem to show that the pursuit of inner, heart-felt prayer and intimacy with God depend on bodily awareness? To answer this set of questions, let us recall our earlier exposition on Macarius's holistic anthropological viewpoint and on the importance he accords to the fundamental unity of body and soul. Let us also remember the deeply incarnational spirit of his doctrine and reiterate that, for Macarius, the enfleshment of the Son is the all-important event that allows for human redemption. Last but not least, it is helpful to recall how close a link Macarius establishes between Christ's glorification on Mount Tabor and the illumination of the bodies of the saints at the resurrection. Surely, his proposition that the body is transfigured along with the soul tells us much about his conception of human embodiment.

As an adherent of holistic biblical anthropology and of the belief that heart and mind, body and soul, constitute a single, unified whole, Macarius views the transfiguration as the quintessential illustration of the notion that the glory of God manifests itself in the outward body.³⁴⁸ Paying special attention to the last day, Macarius suggests that, just as Divinity revealed its radiant presence on Mount Tabor, so it will manifest its heavenly splendor in the resurrection body. The severance of body and soul, which is experienced at death, will be reversed and the two reintegrated. The risen body will reflect perfectly the glorified state achieved by the soul in this life.³⁴⁹ Like the bodies of Adam and Eve which were “covered with God’s glory in place of clothing”³⁵⁰ before the fall and which shone with light in Paradise, so the bodies of the saints will radiate with divine light. Now the saints “possess this glory in their souls . . . but it will then cover and clothe their naked bodies. It will sweep them up into Heaven and we will at last come to rest, both body and soul, with the Lord forever.”³⁵¹ While of this world, the bodies of the saints manifest the glory of God hiddenly. At the resurrection, “the light which even now is in them” will shine forth in all its splendour.³⁵²

The Macarian idea that the body shares in the glory of the soul and that it has a distinct place in the Kingdom of Heaven raises the question how we can account for the austerity and dualistic tendencies that seem to inform some of his teachings. What are we to make of Macarius’s suggestion that only “the person who really has rejected the world and has taken effort to cast from him the weight of this earth and has thrown off the vain

³⁴⁸ Plested (2004), p. 220.

³⁴⁹ Ware, “Preface,” in Maloney (1992), pp. xiv-xv.

³⁵⁰ Macarius, *Hom II.8.12*, in Maloney (1992), p. 100.

³⁵¹ Macarius, *Hom II.5.11*, in Maloney (1992), p. 74.

³⁵² Macarius, *Hom II.5.9*, in Maloney (1992), p. 73.

passions and desires of the flesh, of glory, of authority, and of human honors”³⁵³ can hope to conquer the forces of darkness? How can we reconcile Macarius’s holistic stance with his call for strict asceticism?

Despite the severity of this teaching, it is important to note that Macarius’s belief in the pervasiveness of evil and in the ongoing need for asceticism to combat God’s adversaries is not rooted in metaphysical dualism. If Macarius focuses on the corruption of the heart, he does so primarily in the hope of heightening people’s awareness to their current state of sinfulness.³⁵⁴ His objective is not to invoke an atmosphere of hopelessness but rather to open up the path to God by pointing to the root of human predicament and by asking members of his audience to align themselves with good. Macarius does not propose a separation of the material and immaterial order. For him, the physical world is permeated with the glories of God:

You see how the glories of God are unspeakable and incomprehensible, of ineffable light and eternal mysteries and of innumerable good things. For example, in the visible things around us, it is impossible for anyone to comprehend the number of plants of the earth or of seeds or of various flowers. And it is impossible for anyone to measure all the richness of the earth. Or in the sea, it is impossible for any man to understand the living creatures in it or their number or their kinds or their variety or the measure of the sea’s water or the measure of its extent.³⁵⁵

Like the material world, which brings us daily into contact with the mystery of God’s creation and the light that suffuses it, the human body is a divine creation and inherently good.³⁵⁶ If it gives rise to passions which manifest themselves in untoward actions, it is not the body that is to be held responsible for these acts but rather evil spirits that have enthroned themselves in the body by means of the intellect and thoughts.³⁵⁷

³⁵³ Macarius, *Hom* II.21.5, in Maloney (1992), pp. 154-155.

³⁵⁴ Dörries (1978), p. 15.

³⁵⁵ Macarius, *Hom* II.34.3, in Maloney (1992), p. 204.

³⁵⁶ Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 254.

³⁵⁷ Macarius, *Hom* II.5.5, in Maloney (1992), p. 77.

Once the intellect knows how to guard the heart against evil and is able to prevent the ignition of distorting passions, once a person's innermost self has been purified, human beings regain their natural state of health.³⁵⁸ This state is characterized by the transformation of their entire being into God's throne. Mind and body radiate with the glory of Divinity.³⁵⁹

For Macarius, it is thus not the body that prevents communion with God but rather "passions hidden deeply in us [which] are not from our nature, but come from an outside source."³⁶⁰ The body itself is permeated by grace and participates in the sanctified state of the perfect. By way of the heart, the meeting-point between God and the individual, supernatural light penetrates its every limb. For Macarius, the inherent goodness and glory of our embodied state is epitomized by the incarnation. The body served as the vital instrument by means of which Christ effected human salvation. Without assuming human flesh, he could not have carried the cross as his tool and removed from the barren soul the thorns and thistles of evil spirits. Without a body, Christ could not have planted the most beautiful paradise of the Spirit in the human heart.³⁶¹ The body is simultaneously the instrument of salvation and its object.

Macarius's ascetical doctrine has much in common with the teachings of his Syrian predecessors. Like the doctrine of Aphrahat and Ephrem, it is steeped in biblical anthropology and its holistic conception of human nature. His positive views on the human body and on the material order are pervasive. Pervasive, too, is Macarius's interest

³⁵⁸ Plested (2004), p. 250.

³⁵⁹ Macarius, *Hom II.5.5*, in Maloney (1992), p. 77.

³⁶⁰ Macarius, *EM*, in Maloney (1992), p. 254.

³⁶¹ Macarius, *Hom II.28.3*, in Maloney (1992), p. 185.

in public worship and the inherently relational nature of Christian existence, an interest he maintains despite his commitment to the interiorization of the temple motif.

While Macarius's debt to the teachings of his Syrian predecessors is well established, it is of interest to note that he was a theologian who stood at the confluence of different currents of early Christian thought.³⁶² Macarius was influenced by a variety of teachings and articulated a doctrine that reflects the complex, pluralistic nature of the ancient church. Although the biblical tradition of the heart dominated his discourse, he was no stranger to the mystical teaching of the Alexandrian Greek milieu and incorporated elements of this teaching into his own doctrine. A brief glance at the intellectual-immaterial elements of Macarius's teaching will shed light on this aspect of his corpus.

Traces of the Hellenic Christian tradition, which was so indebted to Platonic teaching, can be detected throughout Macarius's writings. The Syrian ascetic indicates his familiarity with this tradition, for instance, by repeatedly employing the categories of type and antitype, outer and inner, visible and invisible.³⁶³ The ancient Law, Macarius suggests, is a shadow of the New Covenant. The earthly church anticipates the heavenly church. The public celebration of the liturgy points to the celebration of the interior liturgy. For Macarius, as for Christians of ancient Alexandria, the entire visible world is a shadow or type of the eternal world. The beauty humans witness below is but a reflection of the Beauty they hope to encounter above. It is a shadow of the Supremely Beautiful.³⁶⁴

If, then, you believe these things to be true, as indeed they are, look to yourself to see whether your soul has found its guiding light and the genuine meat and drink which is the Lord. If you have not, seek night and day in order to receive. When you see the sun, seek

³⁶² Golitzin (2002), p. 135.

³⁶³ Dörries (1978), p. 392, n. 49; Golitzin (1994), p. 160.

³⁶⁴ See, for instance, Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (London: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 48-50.

the true sun. For you are blind. When you gaze on a light, look into your soul to see whether you have found the true and good light. For all the visible things of the senses are but a shadow of the true realities of the soul.³⁶⁵

Macarius further indicates his familiarity with Christianity's Hellenic heritage by drawing on the image of the chariot, a motif that not only calls to mind the light-filled vision of Ezekiel (1:4-2:1) but also Plato's reference in the *Phaedrus* to the chariot of the soul which is driven by its pilot, the intellect.³⁶⁶ Macarius presents this image within a Christian context and suggests that the soul is the chariot which is driven by Christ, the authentic Charioteer who "is mounted on the soul and guides it with the reins of the Spirit, directing it according to his knowledge of the way."³⁶⁷ If we recall our discussion of Macarius's conception of the *nous* as the captain of the heart who has the entire vehicle under its control,³⁶⁸ we detect yet another variation on Plato's famous motif.

There is still further evidence suggesting Macarius's awareness of Christianity's Greek philosophical background and his openness to a teaching associated with a tradition other than his own.³⁶⁹ Macarius was familiar, for instance, with the Hellenic notion of the intellect's ascent from materiality and did not hesitate to employ noetic terminology to describe the mind's longing to "co-mingle with unoriginate intellect."³⁷⁰ Likewise, he was acquainted with the mutually supporting chain of virtues and with the concept of the *logismoi*, two teachings we are wont to associate with Evagrius rather than with the author of the Macarian corpus. While heir to the Syrian tradition and greatly indebted to a language abounding with liturgical and heart imagery, Macarius thus did not

³⁶⁵ Macarius, *Hom* II.33.4, in Maloney (1992), p. 202.

³⁶⁶ Plato, *Phaedrus and the Seventh and Eighth Letters*, tr. Walter Hamilton (London: Penguin Books, 1973), pp. 50-57.

³⁶⁷ Macarius, *Hom* II.1.3, in Maloney (1992), pp. 38-39.

³⁶⁸ Macarius, *Hom* II.15.34, in Maloney (1992), p. 121.

³⁶⁹ Plested (2004), p. 30; Golitzin (2002), p. 160.

³⁷⁰ Macarius, *Hom* I.3.6.1, in Berthold (1973), p. 46, cited in Plested (2004), p. 66.

exclude Greek Christian elements from his ascetical doctrine. At home in a world in which the mystical teaching of the church was articulated along a continuum, veering between the Semitic pole and the Hellenic pole, Macarius aligned himself with the former without excluding from his doctrine pertinent teachings of the latter.

To conclude this discussion of Macarius's ascetical doctrine, let us propose that his legacy is of a twofold nature. On the one hand, Macarius is remembered for his heart-centered language and for the ability to endow his teaching with a strong sense of God's movement to take possession of the heart.³⁷¹ His conception of our innermost self as a liturgical site where the worthy glorify God and which, if purified, is transfigured into God's radiant temple situates his teaching firmly within a Syrian milieu. Like Aphrahat and Ephrem, Macarius was deeply committed to the holistic conception of human nature and never divorced the body from the process of sanctification. If purified, the body was permeated with grace and participated fully in the sanctified state of the perfect. Like his predecessors, he believed that this sanctified state was attained, first and foremost, by imitating the egalitarian and loving existence of the angelic realm and by manifesting, in the here and now, the eschatological community that Christ will assemble around him at the end of time. For Macarius, the manifestation of this community depended on participation in the fellowship of the earthly church. Despite his interest in the spiritualization of the liturgy, he never suggested that religious seekers divorce themselves from the daily affairs of the Christian community. He insisted that the encounter with God in the deepest recesses of the heart depends on relationality.

³⁷¹ McGuckin (1999), p. 96.

A further, though less prominent, aspect of Macarius's legacy may be seen in his ability to articulate an ascetical doctrine that is open to diverse yet by no means incompatible early Christian teachings. By taking a first step in joining elements of the Syrian and the Hellenic Christian mystical currents, Macarius provided later theologians with an important example to emulate. Unbeknownst to him, he set the stage for the synthesis of these legacies in later centuries and the flowering of the prayer of the heart tradition during the Byzantine hesychast era.

We will have more to say on the intermarriage of the two early Christian mystical currents in due course. Yet before we can examine how the progressive joining of these currents allowed for the crystallization of the doctrine of the prayer of the heart, we have to explore the Hellenic Christian background of this ancient practice. To this end, we will now turn our attention to ancient Alexandria and to the writings of Origen, one of the most prominent theologians of the ancient church and a chief engineer of its mystical heritage.

CHAPTER 4

The Hellenic Christian Background to the Prayer of the Heart

Origen of Alexandria

In the attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the prayer of the heart, it is essential to consider the doctrine of Origen of Alexandria (c. 186-255), a theologian of the ancient church who is rightly considered to be the father of Christian mystical thought and whose teachings on anthropology, the ascetical struggle, divine contemplation, and the soul's deifying union with God influenced many subsequent theologians, most notably the Cappadocians, Evagrius of Pontus, Dionysius the Areopagite, and Maximus the Confessor. Given the extent of Origen's legacy and his lasting contributions to the ancient practice of inner prayer, it is well worth our time to consider prominent features of his ascetical teaching in greater detail.

Origen of Alexandria was the most notable biblical scholar, dogmatic theologian, and mystical writer of the early church, and, despite his posthumous condemnation by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 and the ensuing attempt to destroy the Origenian body of work, his influence on Christian teaching has been immense. Many valuable scholarly works have focused on Origen, the biblicist, as well as on Origen, the philosopher-theologian much influenced by Middle Platonic thought, and it is indeed impossible to understand his doctrine without paying close attention to these two aspects of the

Origenian legacy.³⁷² At the same time, it is essential to note that this third century theologian was not a mere theoretician who embraced the exclusively intellectual study of Scripture and ancient philosophy. Origen was also an ascetical teacher and ordained priest who strove to exemplify the mystical insights he derived from biblical exegesis and Greek metaphysics on a daily, practical basis. His teaching, while at times highly speculative, was always rooted in a life of fasting, abstinence, contemplation, and active service,³⁷³ an aspect of Origen's legacy that established him as an exemplar of ascetic piety and endeared him to the earliest proponents of the monastic movement.³⁷⁴ Especially writings conceived in Caesarea, where Origen was ordained and where he delivered countless sermons, bear witness to his forceful pastoral style and to his desire to impress upon the local congregation the importance of living the Christian life in an experiential manner.³⁷⁵ The upcoming discussion will focus on this aspect of Origen's

³⁷² For studies on Origen, the biblicist, see, for instance, Hans Bietenhard, *Caesarea: Origenes und die Juden* (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer GmbH, 1974); P. M. Blowers, "Origen, the Rabbis, and the Bible," in *Origen of Alexandria*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 96-116; Nicholas R. M. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Karen Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Methods in Origen's Exegesis* (New York: de Gruyter, 1986); Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta, GA: J. Knox, 1983). Origen's debt to Platonic teaching is discussed, among others, in Robert Berchman, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984); Charles Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968); Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984); Hal Koch, *Pronoia und Paideusis: Studien über Origenes und sein Verhältnis zum Platonismus*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979); J. C. M. Van Winden, "Le Christianisme et la philosophie. Le commencement du dialogue entre la foi et la raison," in *Kyriakon*, Festschrift in Honor of Johannes Quasten (Münster: Aschendorff, 1970), pp. 205-213.

³⁷³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.3.9-13. As pointed out by McGuckin, although Eusebius presents this picture of Origen with the intention of linking him to the ascetics of the late fourth century for whom he was writing, there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of his comments; see McGuckin (2004a), "The Life of Origen," by John A. McGuckin, p. 6, n. 38.

³⁷⁴ McGuckin (2004a), v.s. "Asceticism" by Vincent L. Wimbush, p. 64; idem (2004b), v.s. "Origen," p. 243.

³⁷⁵ A fine example of Origen's pastoral style is featured in his *Treatise on Prayer* which includes a section devoted to the exegesis of the Lord's Prayer. The section seems to have been part of a lecture series intended for catechumens of the Caesarean church, preparing themselves for baptism; see McGuckin (2004a), "The Life of Origen," p. 17.

legacy. Yet before we give thought to his lasting contributions as ascetical teacher and spiritual guide, let us take a moment to consider his role as Platonic thinker and biblicist.

There can be little doubt that Greek philosophy exerted a decisive influence over Origen's thought. Platonic cosmology and anthropology greatly shaped his views on the contemplative life,³⁷⁶ and Origen never affirmed sacramental materiality to quite the degree that some of his Alexandrian successors did, most notably Athanasius and Cyril.³⁷⁷ Plato's doctrine of the soul's attempt to unite with the Transcendent Absolute through divine contemplation made a lasting impression on Origen, as did the Platonic understanding that the beatifying union resulted from an ascending process of purification and illumination. Indeed, even a cursory glance at Plato's famous allegory of the cave, which presents this process in terms of the soul's gradual awakening, detachment from false reality, and attachment to true reality, allows readers to detect distinct Greek echoes in Origen's own description of the soul's mystical journey.³⁷⁸ Both thinkers believed that the pre-existent, divine soul had to experience a radical re-orientation if it was to scale the heights of the intelligible realm and be united with its source of origin. Plato and Origen agreed that the process of returning to the supersensible realm could be accomplished only if the soul exerted the greatest possible effort and mustered all of its mental discipline.³⁷⁹ Constant striving for perfection was the only means by which the soul could come to know and participate in its object of contemplation, the Supremely Good and Beautiful.

³⁷⁶ McGuckin (2004a), v.s. "Mystical Thought," by Alan Paddle, p. 154.

³⁷⁷ McGuckin (2001), pp. 28-29.

³⁷⁸ Louth (1981), pp. 5-6.

³⁷⁹ For a discussion of Plato's emphasis on the need for effort and discipline in the soul's ascent see Copleston (1993), p. 162.

But Origen's relationship to Greek philosophy was complex, and if the priest-theologian was well versed in this discipline, he was equally fluent in scriptural studies. His knowledge of the Old and the New Testament was profound and the countless homilies, commentaries, and scholia on books of the canon of Scripture which he bequeathed to posterity bear witness to the extent of his learnedness. As a trained grammarian, Origen was deeply concerned to establish the correct Greek translation of the Old Testament on which to base his interpretations. To this end, he committed to a lifelong project, the writing of the *Hexapla*, a six-column edition of the Bible featuring the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, its Greek transliteration, and the four standard Greek versions of the Scriptures.³⁸⁰ The *Hexapla* is a milestone in biblical research and established Origen as the father of textual criticism of the Bible in the Christian tradition.³⁸¹ It attests to his lasting devotion to literary scholarship and to the study of the Bible.

Origen's commitment to Christianity's Semitic heritage colors his mystical doctrine in many respects, and we will spend much time exploring this feature in the upcoming pages. To set the stage for this exploration, it is helpful to consider two doctrines, in particular, his doctrines of the divine image and of the soul's ascent, both of which derive from the careful study of Scripture. Once we have examined these doctrines, we can turn our attention to other Origenian teachings on the ascetical life and consider the degree to which these, too, rest on biblical lore.

³⁸⁰ McGuckin (2004a), "The Scholarly Works of Origen," by John A. McGuckin, p. 27.

³⁸¹ Trigg (1983), p. 85.

To articulate his doctrine of the divine image, Origen drew on the concept of the *nous*. As was suggested in the introduction of this study, he employed the concept to describe the highest aspect of the soul, the mind or intellect. In its pre-fallen state, Origen believed the *nous* to have been at home in the spiritual, non-material realm, capable of perceiving and understanding God perfectly. While the *nous* lost this ability when it fell away from the contemplation of God through carelessness, it nevertheless retained its kinship with the immaterial realm. For Origen, it never ceases to possess within itself the means of restoration, provided it is “recalled into the image and likeness of God.”³⁸²

While Origen’s concept of the *nous* rests on Greek metaphysics,³⁸³ he effected a synthesis of this concept with the scriptural tradition by linking it to the biblical notion of the image. According to this Origenian doctrine, the *nous* is created in the image of the Logos, the Word and Image of the invisible God.³⁸⁴ The Logos’s image is imprinted on the *nous* at creation and insures that human beings are defined, at the deepest level, by their relationship with God. By engaging in the long process of purifying the inner image, humans are able to free this image from the many layers of tarnish accrued by sinfulness and to assimilate progressively to the Logos, their divine model. The refashioning of the

³⁸² Origen, *Paroch 4.4.9*, in *Origen: On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), p. 327.

³⁸³ In his use of the concept, Origen aligns himself with the most renowned of Greek thinkers, starting out with Homer who employed the term to indicate all mental activity. According to the pre-Socratics, *nous* refers specifically to knowledge and reason while also describing a divine principle, responsible for arranging the universe. This view was shared by Plato who, in the *Timaeus*, identifies the *nous* with the Demiurge, the craftsman of the universe.³⁸³ Plato went on to suggest that it also designates the rational part of the soul. Aristotle equated the *nous* that thinks itself with the Prime Mover as well as with the intellect. Middle Platonism, which provided the backdrop to Origen’s philosophical teaching, for the most part continued the tradition of employing the term to denote the divine principle of the universe and of the individual soul. For a discussion of the concept, see Copleston (1993); John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

³⁸⁴ According to Origen, only the Logos is in the strict sense the ‘Image of God.’ Souls, in turn, are ‘images of the Image,’ see Crouzel (1989), p. 93; McGuckin (2004b), v.s. ‘Image of God,’ pp. 178-179. For a detailed discussion of Origen’s teaching on the ‘Image of God,’ see Henri Crouzel, *Théologie de l’Image de Dieu chez Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1956).

image allows humans to gain in virtue and wisdom. It allows them to draw ever closer to the divine realm and to attain the deifying perfection of God's likeness at the height of the mystical ascent. If we consider Origen's own words on this teaching, we find that he is careful to point to Scripture as his source of inspiration:

The highest good, towards which all rational nature is progressing, and which is also called the end of all things, is defined by very many even among philosophers in the following way, namely, that the highest good is to become as far as possible like God.³⁸⁵ But this definition is not so much, I think, a discovery of their own, as something taken by them out of the divine books. For Moses, before all others, points to it when in recording the first creation of man he says, 'And God said, Let us make man in our own image and likeness' (Gen. 1:26). Then he adds afterwards, 'And God made man; in the image of God made he him; male and female made he them, and he blessed them' (Gen. 1:27-28). Now the fact that he said, 'He made him in the image of God', and was silent about the likeness, points to nothing else but this, that man received the honour of God's image in his first creation, whereas the perfection of God's likeness was reserved for him at the consummation. The purpose of this was that man should acquire it for himself by his own earnest efforts to imitate God, so that while the possibility of attaining perfection was given to him in the beginning through the honour of the 'image', he should in the end through the accomplishment of these works obtain for himself the perfect 'likeness'.³⁸⁶

Origen has much to say on the dynamic progression from image to likeness which is at the heart of his doctrine of the soul's ascent and which encapsulates the process of divinization. According to the third century theologian, God's perfect likeness is attained by traversing a path that consists of three stages, the preparatory stage of purification (*ethike*), the second stage of illumination and growth in knowledge (*physike*), and the final stage of union with God (*enoptike*). While this division derives in part from Platonic and Middle Platonic teaching,³⁸⁷ and while it is indeed possible to relate the three phases of the quest for God to the Greek disciplines of *ethics*, *physics*, and *enoptics*, Origen once again points to the canon of the Old Testament, specifically to the three books of Solomon, as a major influence:

³⁸⁵ G. W. Butterworth here indicates Origen's debt to Plato's *Theaetetus* 176 B.

³⁸⁶ Origen, *PArch* 3.6.1, in Butterworth (1973), p. 245.

³⁸⁷ Louth points to the Stoic as well as Middle Platonic origins of this teaching. See Louth (1981), p. 57. See also Dillon (1996), p. 272.

Now it seems to me that certain wise men of the Greeks took these ideas from Solomon, since it was long before them in age and time that he first gave these teachings through the Spirit of God. . . . Thus, Solomon, since he wished to distinguish from one another and to separate what we have called earlier the three general disciplines, that is, moral, natural, and contemplative, set them forth in three books, each one in its own logical order. Thus, he first taught in Proverbs the subject of morals, setting regulations for life together, as was fitting, in concise and brief maxims. And he included the second subject, which is called the natural discipline, in Ecclesiastes, in which he discusses many natural things. And by distinguishing them as empty and vain from what is useful and necessary, he warns that vanity must be abandoned and what is useful and right must be pursued. He also handed down the subject of contemplation in the book we have in hand, that is, Song of Songs, in which he urges upon the soul the love of the heavenly and the divine under the figure of the bride and the bridegroom, teaching us that we must attain fellowship with God by the paths of loving affection and of love.³⁸⁸

The above words illustrate well Origen's deep commitment to Scripture and its exegesis, a commitment he never abandoned and that left a permanent mark on his mystical doctrine. The above words also provide us with a basic outline of Origen's doctrine of the soul's ascent. Let us take the opportunity to look more closely at this highly influential Origenian teaching.

Taking as his starting-point the idea that human sin has shrouded the soul's image of the Logos in darkness, thereby making participation in divine life impossible, Origen posits that the journey into the presence of God calls for the initial remission of sin in baptism and the progressive purification of the inner image.³⁸⁹ In baptism, Christians begin their earnest effort to imitate God by correcting flawed behavioral patterns and by acquiring virtue. Baptism marks the beginning of a journey that allows them to become aware of their sinfulness, of the brittleness of transitory things, and of the need to turn their backs on worldly distractions. Religious seekers begin to clean inner faculties with which it is possible to behold spiritual truths and learn to distinguish between good and

³⁸⁸ Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, in *Origen: The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957), pp. 40-41.

³⁸⁹ Evidence that for Origen the mystical life begins with baptism can be found, for instance, in *HomCt* 1 in which he divides the journey toward God into seven songs, the first song describing the soul's coming out of Egypt and crossing of the Red Sea, i.e. its conversion and baptism; see Lawson (1957), p. 266. For a discussion of the passage see Louth (1981), pp. 55-56.

evil. They acquire greater self-knowledge and self-control, thus taking a first, all-important step toward the gradual restoration of the Logos's inner image.³⁹⁰ Origen provides a summarizing outline of the first mystical stage in the following passage:

If, then, a man has completed his course in the first subject, as taught in Proverbs, by amending his behaviour and keeping the commandments, and thereafter, having seen how empty is the world and realized the brittleness of transitory things, has come to renounce the world and all that is therein, he will follow on from that point to contemplate and to desire the things that are not seen, and that are eternal (2 Cor. 4:18).³⁹¹

The Logos instructs the soul on vital matters, such as moderation, discernment, and virtue during the initial stage of purification. It deepens its ties with the soul throughout the second stage of the mystical journey by guiding its charge toward greater knowledge and progressive illumination.³⁹² During this stage, which can be divided into two phases, an earlier phase that is concerned with the acquisition of earthly knowledge and the soul's ability to understand the nature of temporal things and a later phase that seeks to develop the soul's comprehension of divine realities and spiritual mysteries, the Logos teaches the soul how to detect the inner principles, or *logoi*, of created things.³⁹³ Based on the understanding that the material order is suffused by *logoi* and inherently linked to the invisible realm, Origen proposes that the close study of the visible world and its inner principles guides the soul steadily toward knowledge of the heavenly sphere:

³⁹⁰ For a detailed presentation of the initial stage of purification see Origen's *HomNum* 27. In it, he interprets the 33rd Chapter of Numbers allegorically, suggesting that the wandering of the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land sheds light on the soul's departure from the darkness of sin toward knowledge of God. See *Origen: An Exhortation to Martyrdom, On Prayer, First Principles IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 255-262. A close reading of the first stage and its individual stations is provided by Torjesen (1986), pp. 74-75.

³⁹¹ Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, Lawson (1957), pp. 45-46.

³⁹² For a detailed description of the second stage of the mystical quest, see Origen's explication in *HomNum* 27.12, in Greer (1979), pp. 263-268. A close reading of this passage is provided in Torjesen (1986), p. 75.

³⁹³ The subdivision of the second stage is discussed in Torjesen (1986), pp. 82-83; Walther Völker, *Das Vollkommenheitsideal des Origenes: Eine Untersuchung zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit und zu den Anfängen christlicher Mystik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1931), pp. 91-98.

Paul the apostle teaches us that the invisible things of God are understood by means of things that are visible, and that the things that are not seen are beheld through their relationship and likeness to things seen. He thus shows that this visible world teaches us about that which is invisible, and that this earthly scene contains certain patterns of things heavenly. Thus it is to be possible for us to mount up from things below to things above, and to perceive and understand from the things we see on earth the things that belong to heaven. On the pattern of these the Creator gave to His creatures on earth a certain likeness to these, so that thus their great diversity might be more easily deduced and understood.³⁹⁴

The notion that an “earthly scene contains certain patterns of things heavenly,” to which Origen refers in the above words, is an important feature of his ascetical doctrine. For him, the only true knowledge of temporal things is knowledge of their inner rationality, their *logoi*. *Logoi* are the rational principles inherent in all created things. They have their origin in the Logos and are the means by which all things are formed. The *logos* of a thing is the imprint of the Logos imparted at creation. Like the *nous*, the *logos* reflects the image of its creator. Given the inherent affinity between the *logoi* and the Logos, knowledge of the former implies partial knowledge of the latter.³⁹⁵

In view of the far-reaching implications which the ability to discern the rational principles of created things has, it is not surprising that Origen accords a central place to the acquisition of this particular skill. Without knowledge of the world and its underlying *logoi*, the soul cannot gain a deeper understanding of God. It cannot progress into the presence of Divinity. We will return to this aspect of Origen’s doctrine as we consider the theologian’s views on embodied existence toward the end of this section. It will serve as a valuable reminder that Origen, despite his call for the renunciation of worldly vanities, does not negate the inherent value of the material order, including the body.

³⁹⁴ Origen, *ComCt* 3.12, in Lawson (1957), p. 218.

³⁹⁵ Torjesen (1986), pp. 82-83; Louth (1981), p. 60.

Although knowledge of the *logoi* is an all-important step in gaining a fuller understanding of the Logos, the discernment of a thing's underlying principle, in turn, calls for greater knowledge of the Logos. For this reason, the soul cannot progress beyond the second stage of the mystical journey unless the Logos, the source of all rational principles, continuously mediates itself to the soul. During the stage of illumination, the Word of God therefore fulfils its role as divine guide primarily by proclaiming itself. As the single Truth of which all natural and supernatural creations are but partial expressions, the Logos progressively illuminates the soul by communicating its own being.³⁹⁶ By doing so, it permits the soul to assimilate to its Creator and to participate in divine life to an ever increasing degree.

The soul's direct encounter with God and its culminating divinization take place during the last stage of the mystical journey, the stage of perfection. Through the progressive self-mediation of the Logos in the second phase of the ascent, the soul has successfully restored its divine inner image. It has ascended from partial to full knowledge of the Logos. By participating fully in the divine life of the Logos, the soul now attains knowledge of God. It is able to contemplate Divinity directly and to reflect God's perfect likeness.³⁹⁷ After a long struggle and much guidance by the Logos, the soul's earnest efforts to imitate its divine model and to restore the inner image to its original state are rewarded by a transformative union with Divinity.

Throughout his elucidation of the soul's quest, Origen pays close attention to the role of the Logos. From the moment the soul embarks on the first stage of the journey

³⁹⁶ Torjesen (1986), p. 119.

³⁹⁷ Origen, *PArch* 2.11.3 in Butterworth (1973), p. 149.

until it reaches its goal in the third stage, the Logos is ever by its side. During the stage of *ethike*, the Logos guides the soul toward moderation, virtue, and purity. Throughout the stage of *physike*, the divine Word instructs the soul on the discernment of archetypal reality and illuminates it with heavenly knowledge. As the soul advances still further in its quest for perfection, the Logos initiates it into spiritual mysteries. Through its ongoing self-mediation, the Logos readies the soul for the deifying union with God and for participation in divine life.

To convey the manifold means by which the divine Logos facilitates the soul's quest for God, Origen makes extensive use of the Son's many scriptural titles.³⁹⁸ For the priest-theologian, these titles, or *epinoiai*, pay tribute to the intimate tie between the Logos, the Christ, and the soul. They are powerful reminders of the former's salvific involvement in human affairs. To convey Christ's vital role as mediator between the divine and the earthly realm, Origen refers to him, among others, as the "Way" and the "Door." Christ opens the path to oneness with God. Those who know the Son, know the Father.³⁹⁹ For Origen, Christ is the "true Food" who nourishes the human soul.⁴⁰⁰ As the soul's "Bread" and "Vine," he lends it spiritual strength and intoxicates it with heavenly wisdom. In other instances, Origen refers to the Logos as the soul's "Physician" who prescribes bitter medicines to its ailing patient in the hope of introducing it to the sweetness of salvation.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁸ More information on Origen's *epinoiai* doctrine can be found in McGuckin (2004a), v.s. "Epinoiai," by Ronald E. Heine, pp. 93-95; idem (2004a), v.s. "Logos," by Joseph S. O'Leary, pp. 142-145; Virginia L. Noel, "Nourishment in Origen's 'On Prayer,'" in *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. R. J. Daly (Louvain: Peeters, 1992), pp. 481-487.

³⁹⁹ Origen, *Com.In* 19.39, in *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, books 13-32, trans. Ronald E. Heine. FOTC 89. (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), p. 176.

⁴⁰⁰ Origen, *HomNum* 27.1, in Greer (1979), pp. 245-247.

⁴⁰¹ Origen, *HomNum* 27.1, in Greer (1979), p. 260.

Origen's emphasis on Christ's scriptural titles is an important means by which he suggests the very intimate relationship between the soul and its heavenly guide. As established by Frédéric Bertrand in his work *Mystique de Jésus chez Origène* and as noted by Hausherr in *The Name of Jesus*, it is a feature by means of which Origen endows his writings with a deeply felt, embodied Jesus mysticism.⁴⁰² Revolving as it does around the person of the Redeemer and his revelation in the hearts of Christians, this mystical approach heralds the very personal, intuitive experience of Divinity.

A text that reveals the extent of Origen's Jesus mysticism is his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, a work that has been deeply inspiring to many Christian writers and that remains a key text of the Christian mystical tradition to this day. While Origen provides vivid imagery to convey the intimacy between the soul and the Logos in many of his writings, not least by making use of the above mentioned *epinoiai*, he takes this feature to altogether new heights in his exposition of Solomon's love song. In it, Origen presents a detailed description of the soul's final ascent into the presence of God and, as he does so, focuses all attention on the mystical interpretation of this scriptural passage rather than on its theoretical explication.⁴⁰³ Let us consider Origen's exegesis of the biblical love song more closely and examine the degree to which it reflects his devotion to a heart-centered Jesus mysticism.

In accordance with his allegorical reading of Scripture, Origen discusses the Song of Songs less in terms of a king marrying his bride, or even of God speaking to Israel but rather in terms of the divine Logos addressing his bride, the soul.⁴⁰⁴ Origen's primary concern is to describe their deep love and culminating mystical union. As a means of

⁴⁰² Frédéric Bertrand, *Mystique de Jésus chez Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1951); Hausherr (1978), pp. 20-29.

⁴⁰³ Völker (1931), p. 98.

⁴⁰⁴ McGuckin (2004a), "The Scholarly Works of Origen," by John A. McGuckin, p. 31.

conveying the intensity of feeling, Origen employs the image of the dart and wound of love:⁴⁰⁵

If there is anyone anywhere who has at some time burned with this faithful love of the Word of God; if there is anyone who has received the sweet wound of Him who is the chosen dart, as the prophet says; if there is anyone who has been pierced with the lovable spear of His knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for Him by day and night, can speak of nought but Him, would hear of nought but Him, can think of nothing else, and is disposed to no desire nor longing nor yet hope, except for Him alone—if such there be, that soul then says in truth: 'I have been wounded by charity.'⁴⁰⁶

The above words bear tribute to the profoundly intimate nature of the relationship between the soul and the Logos. The love which the former harbors for the Word is an intensely felt, visceral love. The soul longs for its companion with a passion that is all-consuming. With Origen, the Logos ceases to be the abstract construct of Greek philosophy⁴⁰⁷ and is transformed into God's personalized Son who is deeply committed to the soul's welfare and who makes his presence felt in a tangible way. The Logos is the divine lover and companion. He is the heavenly Bridegroom who ignites in his bride a burning desire for intimacy. This conception of the Logos can be found throughout Origen's exposition on the Song of Songs. In one instance, he describes the growing intimacy between the soul and the Logos within the context of prayer:

While she [the bride] is thus praying to the Father, she is ready to add to this very prayer in which she said: 'Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth,' some further words of prayer, and to say that, even as she began to utter those words, the Bridegroom was present and standing by her as she prayed, and that He revealed His breasts to her And now let us enquire what the inner meaning holds. We find the ground principle of the heart described in the Divine Scriptures by different words according to the cases and circumstances that are being discussed. Sometimes it is simply called 'the heart,' as, for example: *Blessed are the clean of heart*, and: *With the heart we believe unto justice*. But

⁴⁰⁵ Crouzel (1989), p. 123.

⁴⁰⁶ Origen, *ComCt* 3.8, in Lawson (1957), p. 198.

⁴⁰⁷ The term held great prominence especially among Stoic philosophers who defined the Logos as the rational order of the universe and a life-giving force hidden within all things. For the Stoics, the Logos was an active principle, a spirit (*pneuma*), or fiery vapour that forms and organizes all matter. As mind or consciousness pervades the body, so the Logos permeates reality; see J. Pepin, "Logos," pp. 9-15, in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 9, ed. Mircea Eliade and Charles Adams (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), p. 9.

if the occasion be that of a meal, and the appearance and order of those reclining at table are being described, it is called the 'bosom' or 'breast.'⁴⁰⁸

The above reference to the heart in general but especially within the context of prayer and its association with divine-human intimacy is of great interest. It indicates that Origen was well acquainted with the biblical notion of the heart and all that it entails, i.e. the need for purity of heart (the clean of heart are blessed), the heart as a person's moral center (it is with the heart that humans believe unto justice), and the heart as the place where divine mysteries are revealed (the Bridegroom reveals his breast, that is, his heart, to the bride).⁴⁰⁹ Like the ancient Israelites, Origen conceived of this inner faculty as a place of divine indwelling. Once the soul has advanced sufficiently along the path of purification and illumination, it is able

to receive 'the King reclining at His table' in herself. For this King says Himself: *I will dwell among them, and I will walk among them*, meaning among those, surely, who offer such roomy hearts to the Word of God that he may even be said to walk about in them, that is, in the open space of a fuller understanding and a wider knowledge.⁴¹⁰

The idea that an enlarged, illuminated heart is receptive to divine teachings and spacious enough to receive God is suggested also in the following words:

And rightly does he [Solomon] speak of 'stretching out his words' in the heart of him to whom God had given largeness of heart, as we said above. For the heart of a man is enlarged, when he is able, by taking statements from the Divine Books, to expand by fuller teaching the things that are said briefly and in enigmatic ways.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁸ Origen, *ComCt* 1.2, in Lawson (1957), pp. 63-64.

⁴⁰⁹ See also *HomCt* 1.6, in Lawson (1957), p. 276: "And in order that the mystery may be more clearly expressed, they do not say *leaning upon her Nephew's arm*, as we read in most versions—that is to say, *epistērizomēnē*, but *epistēthizomēnē*, that is, *leaning upon His breast*. And it is significant that the expression used concerning the bride-soul and the Bridegroom-Word is *lying upon His breast*, because there is the seat of our heart."

⁴¹⁰ Origen, *ComCt* 2.8, in Lawson (1957), p. 158.

⁴¹¹ Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, in Lawson (1957), p. 43. The spaciousness of the enlightened heart is also presented in the following words taken from Origen's *HomLc* 21.6: "If the human heart is pure, it is great and broad and spacious. Do you wish to know its size and its breadth? See what a great amount of divine thoughts it holds. . . . You see that man's heart, which can grasp so much, is not small. Realize that its greatness is measured not by the size of the body but by the strength of its awareness." In *Origen: Homilies on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), pp. 90-91. For a discussion of Origen's teaching on the capacity of the heart see Bertrand (1951), pp. 103-104.

While Origen emphasizes the need for knowledge in both of the above citations, he proposes that the culminating encounter with God depends ultimately on love, an aspect of his teaching that reinforces its experiential, emotive nature. Recapitulating his doctrine on the three stages of the mystical ascent he writes:

First, in Proverbs he [Solomon] taught the moral science Secondly, he covered the science known as natural in Ecclesiastes The inspective science likewise he has propounded in this little book that we have now in hand—that is, the Song of Songs. In this he instils into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the Bride and Bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained by the paths of charity and love.⁴¹²

From the above words and from Origen's preceding comments on the heart's growing capacity to receive God, we learn much about his conception of this inner faculty. The heart is the spiritual center of a person and a place of divine visitation. Here, Christians interact with the Son of God and receive his divine teachings. Here, they are initiated into heavenly mysteries. In the heart, Christians also receive instruction on the importance of charity and love.⁴¹³ According to Origen, humans cannot hope to enter into lasting relations with God unless they heed this vital piece of divine instruction.

In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Origen emphasizes the idea that the mystical quest is propelled by deep love and persistent yearning for God time and again. Only if the soul is driven by a profound longing to experience the heavenly realm, can it hope to ascend into the presence of Divinity.⁴¹⁴ Origen's description of this process in terms of increasing intimacy between the bride and the Bridegroom, the soul and the Logos, lends a very personal quality to this process. For him, the mystical journey cannot

⁴¹² Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, in Lawson (1957), p. 41.

⁴¹³ J. Christopher King, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom's Perfect Marriage-Song* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 169.

⁴¹⁴ Origen, *ComCt* Prologue 3, in Lawson (1957), p. 41.

be reduced to a purely intellectual pursuit but involves all facets of human existence, the intellectual as well as the emotive, volative, and spiritual.

The biblical notion of the heart provides Origen with the perfect tool to highlight this important feature of his teaching. Since the concept of the heart advances a holistic outlook and unites all aspects of human existence, Origen is able to suggest the all-embracing nature of the quest for God by drawing on this particular concept. He is able to convey the necessity of placing the mystical journey at the very center of the Christian life and of committing to it with all of one's being. Unless a person's quest for perfection is motivated by deep love, it cannot bear fruit and lead to a deifying union. At no point is Origen less abstract and less theoretical than in his discussion of the soul's growing intimacy with God. At no point does he display his commitment to experiential knowledge of God and to the Christian message of love with greater force.

Having begun our exploration of Origen's mystical doctrine by examining salient passages from the *Commentary on the Song of Song*, let us now resume this exploration by consulting relevant passages from some of his other writings. Hopefully, these passages will allow us to observe still further the degree to which the theologian bases his ascetical doctrine on the biblical notion of the heart and, by doing so, tempers the lingering influence that abstract philosophical teaching, especially the concept of the noetic escape from matter, exerted over this doctrine.

In the hope of establishing the degree to which a holistic, affective quality more commonly associated with the writings of early Christian Syrian ascetics colors Origen's mystical doctrine, we do well to inquire more fully into the theologian's use of the term *kardia* and to examine its relationship with the term *nous*. How does Origen conceive of

these two concepts? Do they refer to unrelated human faculties? Or are they perhaps compatible? If we turn to Origen's most systematic work, *On First Principles*, we soon find answers to these questions:

But if the question is put to us why it was said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God', I answer that in my opinion our argument will be much more firmly established by the passage. For what else is 'to see God in the heart' but to understand and know him with the mind? . . . That heart is used for mind, that is for the intellectual faculty, you will certainly find over and over again in all the scriptures, both the New and the Old.⁴¹⁵

Once again, we are made aware of the fact that Origen is well acquainted with the biblical tradition of the heart. Likewise, we come to realize that, for him, the heart is synonymous with the mind. The heart is not merely the affective center of human nature but also its intellectual and spiritual center. It is the interior faculty with which humans are able to meditate on God. We encounter a very similar viewpoint in Origen's apologetic work *Against Celsus*:

Furthermore, in our view because God is not corporeal He is invisible. But He may be perceived by those who can perceive with the heart, that is the mind, though not with an ordinary heart, but with a pure heart. It is not right for a heart that has been defiled to look upon God; that which can deservedly perceive Him who is pure must be pure also.⁴¹⁶

References to a pure, reasoning heart and to the compatibility of the terms *kardia* and *nous* can be found in many of Origen's writings. In his treatise *On Prayer*, the theologian reiterates this teaching and adds to his list of synonyms the term *psyche*.⁴¹⁷ By doing so, Origen allows us to witness the ease with which he moves from one designation to the other. Like the translators of the Septuagint, Origen is not opposed to the interchangeable use of the expressions *kardia*, *nous*, *psyche*, and *hegemonikon*.⁴¹⁸ On

⁴¹⁵ Origen, *PArch* 1.1.9, in Butterworth (1973), p. 14.

⁴¹⁶ Origen, *CCels* 6.69, in *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 383.

⁴¹⁷ Origen, *PEuch* 29.2, in Greer (1979), p. 152.

⁴¹⁸ J. Bauer, "Herz," *RAC* 14.1109.

some occasions, he draws on the Platonist term *nous* (intellect) to designate our deepest self. In other instances, he employs the Stoic term *hegemonikon* (governing faculty) or the biblical term *kardia* (heart).⁴¹⁹ Regardless of his choice of words, it is important to note that, in each instance, Origen seeks to describe the inner faculty that captures our nature in its very essence. In this inner region, we are most truly ourselves. Here, we apprehend the presence of Divinity in an immediate, experiential manner.

With these comments in mind, we can thus establish that Origen's frequent reference to the *nous* does not imply the exclusion of heart imagery from his vocabulary. His *Commentary of the Song of Songs* as well as his other writings indicate a lasting devotion to biblical language and to the heart as the spiritual center of a person. For him, as for Syriac-speaking ascetics of the fourth century, the heart is the organ of contemplation. It is home to the divine image which, if purified, allows for direct contact with God.⁴²⁰ As Origen writes in his exposition on Solomon's love song, the heart is the inner wedding chamber where the bride is presented with the Bridegroom's hidden treasures.⁴²¹ Once it has been purified and illuminated, the heart is filled with divine perception and beholds God face to face.

Origen's reliance on the scriptural tradition of the heart and his reference in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* to the heart as the King's wedding chamber invites the question if the theologian draws on the closely related biblical image of the temple. Does Origen make use of this particular motif? If so, does he interiorize it in much the same way Aphrahat does a century later? Is the heart the new spiritual temple from which

⁴¹⁹ Crouzel (1989), p. 88.

⁴²⁰ Henri Crouzel, "Le cœur selon Origène," *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 85 (1984): 6.

⁴²¹ Origen, *ComCt* 1.5, in Lawson (1957), pp. 84-85; King (2005), p. 169.

Christians offer their pure sacrifice of prayer? Let us take a look at a revealing passage from *Against Celsus*:

After this Celsus says that *we avoid setting up altars and images and temples*, since, he thinks, it is *a sure token of an obscure and secret society*. He does not notice that our altars are the mind of each righteous man, from which true and intelligible incense with a sweet savour is sent up, prayers from a pure conscience. That is why it is said by John in the Apocalypse 'And the incense is the prayers of the saints', and by the Psalmist 'Let my prayers be as incense before thee.'⁴²²

In this passage, we have a clear indication of Origen's use of the temple motif,⁴²³ of his concern to interiorize this motif, and of its association with pure prayer. The deepest layer of our being serves as God's altar from which the faithful offer their sweet-smelling sacrifice. In much the same way in which incense ascends from the physical altar, a prayer offered from a pure conscience, or a pure heart, rises up from the inner, spiritual altar. Origen expounds on this teaching in *On Prayer*, a work that is of particular interest in that it elucidates his doctrine of the heart within the context of prayer:

And He [God] who searches the hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26-27). The Spirit cries "Abba, Father" (cf. Gal 4:6) in the hearts of the blessed; and He knows by careful attention our sighs in this tabernacle, sighs suitable for weighing down those who have fallen or transgressed.⁴²⁴

Once again, Origen's interpretation of the heart in terms of an inner temple becomes apparent. For him, the heart is a spiritual tabernacle. It is frequented by the Spirit who intercedes on behalf of the blessed. The Spirit aids humans in their endeavor to pray:

Such prayers as were truly spiritual, since the Spirit prays in the heart of the saints, were written down, filled with secret and marvelous teachings. In 1 Samuel (1:11-13) part of Hannah's prayer is found, for "when she continued praying before the Lord," she spoke "in her heart" (1 Sam. 1:12-13), and the whole prayer was not put in writing.⁴²⁵

⁴²² Origen, *CCels* 8.17, in Chadwick (1965), p. 464.

⁴²³ Bertrand (1951), pp. 63-64.

⁴²⁴ Origen, *PEuch* 2.3, in Greer (1979), p. 84.

⁴²⁵ Origen, *PEuch* 2.5, in Greer (1979), p. 86.

Drawing on the prominent Old Testament account of Hannah's silent prayer, Origen conveys the profound nature of prayer that is offered from the inner altar of the heart. What better gift, he inquires, "can a rational being send up to God than the fragrant word of prayer, when it is offered from a conscience untainted with the foul smell of sin?"⁴²⁶ Origen is convinced that secret, inner prayer is the quintessential means of encountering God. Prayer presented from the spiritual temple in which "the Father, who does not shun or abandon such a hidden place, . . . dwells . . . together with the presence of His Only Begotten"⁴²⁷ has the power to introduce humans to divine life. By presenting a sweet-smelling sacrifice from the pure heart, Christians catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven. They behold Divinity residing on the throne of glory, its footstool being made of the many enemies who have been conquered by the soul's tireless quest for perfection.⁴²⁸ Origen's commitment to the reconceptualization of the biblical temple motif in terms of the human heart is profound and lasting.

Many of the above features call to mind the teaching of Origen's fourth century Syrian successors, Aphrahat, Ephrem, and Macarius. Given our discussion in previous chapters, the Origenian ideas of the ascetic as God's temple and of the heart as a spiritual altar from which pure prayer ascends toward heaven strike a familiar chord indeed. They reveal to us that Origen, like representatives of the Syrian mystical current, was greatly concerned to align himself with Christianity's Hebraic heritage. He, too, interiorized aspects of this heritage and placed them within a genuine Christian context. The pure heart is the new Christian temple which harbors the throne of God and around which the

⁴²⁶ Origen, *PEuch* 2.2, in Greer (1979), p. 83.

⁴²⁷ Origen, *PEuch* 20.2, in Greer (1979), p. 121.

⁴²⁸ Origen, *PEuch* 25.3, in Greer (1979), p. 133.

host of angels assembles to pray, together with the Logos, for the repenting sinner.⁴²⁹ The heart is the locale where, at the height of the mystical quest, the faithful are illuminated by divine light:

For the eyes of the mind [or of the heart] are lifted up from their preoccupation with earthly things and from their being filled with the impression of material things. . . . How would things so great fail to profit those eyes that gaze at the glory of the Lord with unveiled face and that are being changed into His likeness from glory to glory (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18)?⁴³⁰

By engaging in the process of purification, illumination, and perfection, Christians are able to gaze upon the Shekinah, the glory of the Lord, with unveiled faces. In the heart, they are transformed into the likeness of Divinity. Origen's emphasis on the interiorization of the biblical temple tradition and on God's radiant self-revelation in this inner sanctuary is pronounced and constitutes an essential part of his mystical doctrine. By proposing that the heart can be transformed into a divine dwelling-place, he paves the way for the deeply personal encounter with God. For him, no less than for his Syrian successors, the inner presence of Divinity is a tender, tangible reality.

In view of Origen's wish to interiorize the biblical temple motif, we may wonder why he placed such emphasis on the spiritual interpretation of material reality. Why did Origen deem it essential to stress the immaterial, interior aspect of Christian worship? We are able to better understand this aspect of his mystical doctrine if we bear in mind that Origen articulated his teaching partly in opposition to the anthropomorphic conception of Divinity which, in the third century, was a widespread phenomenon. This conception of the divine, which was perpetuated largely by Old Testament descriptions of God and by

⁴²⁹ Origen, *PEuch* 11.1, in Greer (1979), p. 101.

⁴³⁰ Origen, *PEuch* 9.2, in Greer (1979), p. 99.

common Hellenistic religious practices, was vehemently rejected by Origen. According to the priest-theologian, God is wholly incorporeal, incomprehensible, and immeasurable.⁴³¹ God, Origen suggested, is a spiritual power “which when it lightens a man causes him either to see clearly the truth of all things or to know God himself who is called the truth.”⁴³² Arguing along very similar lines, Origen proceeds to suggest that it is equally inaccurate to conceive of human faculties indiscriminately in physical terms. The names of the human organs of sense, for instance, are easily applied to the soul,

so that we speak of seeing with the eyes of the heart, that is, of drawing some intellectual conclusion by means of the faculty of intelligence. . . . In a similar way we speak of it [the soul] as using all the other bodily organs, which are transferred from their corporeal significance and applied to the faculties of the soul; as Solomon says, ‘You will find a divine sense’. For he knew that there were in us two kinds of senses, the one being mortal, corruptible and human, and the other immortal and intellectual, which here he calls ‘divine’.⁴³³

In this passage, Origen outlines his doctrine of the five spiritual senses, a doctrine that appears to have originated with him and that exemplifies his tendency to interiorize material reality.⁴³⁴ Origen cautions his audience that it is not only incorrect to assume that Old Testament references to the members of God describe physical eyes, ears, and hands or that theophanies related in biblical sources imply that God has a human form.⁴³⁵ It is as incorrect to believe that when Scripture speaks of eyes, ears, and hands, with which humans perceive Divinity, reference is being made to our physical limbs and organs. While we have five bodily senses, we also possess five divine senses. These senses are

⁴³¹ See, for instance, Origen, *PArch* 1.1.1-6, in Butterworth (1973), pp. 7-12.

⁴³² Origen, *PArch* 1.1.1, in Butterworth (1973), p. 7.

⁴³³ Origen, *PArch* 1.1.9, in Butterworth (1973), p. 14.

⁴³⁴ Karl Rahner, “Le debut d’une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origène,” *Revue d’ascetique et de mystique* 13 (1932): 114. For an elucidation of Origen’s teaching on the five spiritual senses see also Louth (1981), pp. 67-69; Torjesen (1986), pp. 79-80.

⁴³⁵ McGuckin (2004a), v.s. “God,” by Ronald E. Heine, p. 107.

faculties of the heart, or the 'interior man,'⁴³⁶ which allow human beings to touch upon God. Prayer is uniquely suited to exercise these spiritual senses. Like no other activity, the silent meditation on God allows for the soul's purification, the heightening of its powers of spiritual perception, and the increasing discernment of God's inner presence.

Origen's reconceptualization of the temple motif and of the five human senses provides but two examples of his tendency to render material reality in spiritual terms. To further explore this aspect of his teaching, we will now cast a glance at a doctrine that is inseparably linked to the interior temple motif, his doctrine of the priesthood. As we will see, for Origen, the authentic priest is the Christian who seeks divine intimacy by becoming a member of the spiritual priesthood and celebrating the inner liturgy. If Origen's emphasis on the interiorization of the priestly office seems to suggest his rejection of embodied, communal existence, the upcoming discussion will also allow us to observe that this is not the case. On the contrary, for Origen, the very notion of spiritual priesthood hinges on a person's involvement in human affairs, including affairs of the church.

Origen expounds his doctrine of spiritual priesthood primarily in the *Homilies on Leviticus* which he wrote eight years after his ordination.⁴³⁷ Like so many of his doctrines, this particular teaching is based on the unique position the Logos holds in the mystical life of the believer. Priestly ministry cannot be conceived of without understanding the ministry of Christ, the quintessential High Priest.

⁴³⁶ Rahner (1932): 118.

⁴³⁷ For a close discussion of this doctrine see John McGuckin, "Origen's Doctrine of the Priesthood," *Clergy Review* 70, no. 8 (August 1985): 277-286, no. 9 (September 1985): 318-325.

Origen takes as his starting-point the idea that the priesthood of Old Testament priests in the order of Aaron has been superseded by the coming of the priesthood of Christ. The material sacrifice of animals in the Jerusalem Temple has given way to the only true sacrifice of Jesus, which he himself offered for the remission of human sin on the cross.⁴³⁸ This sacrifice, of which Christ is simultaneously offerer and offering, has a deeply regenerating effect on human nature:

Therefore, the one and perfect sacrifice, which all these sacrifices had anticipated in type and figure, is "Christ sacrificed." If anyone should "touch" the flesh of this sacrifice, immediately, "he is sanctified." If he is unclean, if he is in "affliction," he is healed.⁴³⁹

The idea that the sacrifice of the incarnate Logos, the supreme mediator between God and humankind, allows for the spiritual reorientation of the created order has profound implications for the lives of individuals who strive to reflect the perfection of their heavenly model. By committing to the ascetical life and seeking progressive purification, illumination, and perfection, these individuals are able to exercise their very own office of priesthood and to offer an inner sacrifice of salvation. If they pursue the virtuous life and acquire divine wisdom, they are able to share in the priesthood of Christ and to be "made into the image of Christ the High Priest who is the archetypal Priest and Victim of the same sacrifice."⁴⁴⁰ The priestly work of reorienting themselves toward the heavenly sphere and of assimilating to the Logos reconciles humans to God:

But each one of us also has in himself his whole burnt offering and he himself lights the altar of his whole burnt offering that it may always burn. . . . Blessed is he in whose heart he finds so subtle, so fine, and so spiritual an understanding and so composed with a diverse sweetness of virtues that he sees fit "to fill his hands" from it and to offer to God the Father the pleasing odor of his understanding.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁸ McGuckin (1985): 277.

⁴³⁹ Origen, *HomLev* 4.8.1, in *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), pp. 81-82.

⁴⁴⁰ McGuckin (1985): 284.

⁴⁴¹ Origen, *HomLev* 9.9.4-6, in Barkley (1990), pp. 196-198.

For Origen, the pursuit of the mystical life and the traversal of its successive stages is the quintessential means of igniting the fire of faith on the altar of the heart. It is the primary means of acquiring the priesthood of virtue and wisdom. Origen attributes such importance to a heart (or mind, depending on his use of terminology) that is illuminated by spiritual understanding as to refer to it not only in terms of an inner altar but also in terms of the 'priest within us:'

The priest, and his sons, is in you the mind which is also its understanding in you who are rightly called a priest and "sons of a priest," for they are the only ones who perceive God and are capable of the knowledge of God.⁴⁴²

The priesthood of the wise, which epitomizes a person's assimilation to the Logos, is the highest manifestation of priesthood Origen envisions.⁴⁴³ No priest is as authentic an image of the archetypal Priest as the wise and sainted ascetic. No altar is as pure as the heart of the Christian who has restored the divine inner image to its original resemblance to God.

At this point of our discussion, it is important to note that Origen's teaching on the interiorization of the temple motif and on the spiritual realization of the gift of priesthood does not diminish his commitment to the church.⁴⁴⁴ Neither teaching calls for the severance of relations with the community of the Spirit. For Origen, the interior altar of the heart and the external altar co-exist. This understanding is supported by the fact that Origen wrote the *Homilies on Leviticus* eight years after his own ordination and that, very likely, personal experience of the common priesthood informed his views on the spiritual priesthood. It is also likely that Origen's own experience of the priestly ministry endowed

⁴⁴² Origen, *HomLev* 1.5.1, in Barkley (1990), p. 37.

⁴⁴³ McGuckin (1985): 285.

⁴⁴⁴ Bertrand (1951), pp. 64-66.

his teaching on the priesthood with a practical, down-to-earth quality. Let us consider if this is indeed the case.

For Origen, aspiration to the office of spiritual priesthood implies the imitation of the Priest of priests and cosmic Reconciler, Christ. The reconciliation achieved in Christ through his once-for-all sacrifice is a constant source of inspiration to Christians. So, too, are his many deeds of charity which propel mystical seekers to follow his example and to pursue an existence of compassion and active service. The importance of a life guided by love and good works is ever on Origen's mind:

No one offers that sacrifice to the Lord unless one who, healthy and conscious of his salvation, renders thanks to the Lord. Thus, no one who is sick in spirit and feeble in works can offer a "salutary sacrifice."⁴⁴⁵

Therefore, this "lamp" [of the temple lit by the priest] shines for each of us inasmuch as it has been lit by the oil of good works. But if we do evil and our works are evil, not only are we not lit, but we also extinguish that lamp for us and, that which Scripture says, is fulfilled in us: "Whoever does evil walks in darkness and whoever hates his brother walks in darkness." For he has extinguished the "lamp" of love and therefore walks in darkness. . . . "But whoever loves his brother" abides in the light of love and can say with confidence, "But I am as an olive tree bearing fruit in the house of God."⁴⁴⁶

As the above citations indicate, Origen established an inherent link between the spiritual priesthood and the Christian life of love and good works. The offering of a pure sacrifice depends on the transcendence of human strife and on the cultivation of egalitarian, neighborly relations. Without a deep commitment to love in action, a Christian cannot hope to emulate and assimilate to the Priest of priests.

For Origen, the priesthood of Christ is also inseparably linked to the active service of propagating wisdom. When religious seekers have so thoroughly progressed in the moral life and learned the ways of God so intimately that they have become virtually 'spiritualized,' it is essential that they fulfill their duty to the rest of the community by

⁴⁴⁵ Origen, *HomLev* 5.12.2, in Barkley (1990), p. 111.

⁴⁴⁶ Origen, *HomLev* 13.2.4, in Barkley (1990), p. 235.

serving as teachers and prophets.⁴⁴⁷ Like no others, these individuals are qualified to convey to fellow-Christians experiential knowledge of God and to serve as their mentors as well as leaders:

Whoever is “perfect” is taught by God himself about the reasons for the festivals and is not accustomed to learn these from a human teacher but he learns them from God, if anyone can grasp the voice of God. But whoever is not such, but is interior, learns from him who has learned from God.⁴⁴⁸

But let them [great priests and teachers] choose clean souls, “virgins in the simplicity of faith which is in Christ”; let them commit to them secret mysteries; let them speak to them the word of God and the secrets of faith that “Christ may be formed” in them through faith. Or, do you not know that from this seed of the word of God which is sown Christ is born in the heart of the hearers?⁴⁴⁹

For Origen, the pursuit of the mystical life, or the pursuit of the spiritual priesthood of Christ, is closely associated with the reaching out to fellow-humans and with active involvement in affairs of the church. This involvement may take the form of caretaker, philanthropist, guide, teacher, or leader. The earthly church is the body of Christ and members of this body are in unity with each other because they are in unity with their Lord.⁴⁵⁰ Like the individual soul, members of the church are called upon, as a community, to strive for perfection by mirroring their heavenly model. The pursuit of perfection implies the ongoing deepening of interpersonal relationships through deeds of goodwill and compassion. Charitable acts are the means by which Christians are reconciled to their neighbor and to God. They are the means by which the earthly church, like the individual soul, becomes worthy of being called the bride of Christ. What is

⁴⁴⁷ McGuckin (1985): 284.

⁴⁴⁸ Origen, *HomLev* 13.1.1, in Barkley (1990), p. 232.

⁴⁴⁹ Origen, *HomLev* 12.7.2, in Barkley (1990), p. 230.

⁴⁵⁰ McGuckin (2004a), v.s. “Church,” by William G. Rusch, p. 80.

fulfilled in the soul that seeks bridal relations with the Bridegroom is also effected in the church that seeks to model itself after the heavenly church.⁴⁵¹

By identifying the bride of the Song of Songs with the soul as well as with the church, Origen establishes an inherent link between the ascetical and the ecclesial life. The life of the soul and the life of the church are inseparable. Both represent true participation in the Logos. By presenting his audience with this teaching, Origen forestalls any suggestion that his mystical theology advocates the spiritualization of the individual at the expense of ecclesial, communal existence. The reconceptualization of the temple motif and of the priestly office does not render void the reality of the church. Nor does it call into question the importance of interpersonal relationships facilitated by this earthly institution.

If Origen's emphasis on the spiritualization of material existence, including Christian worship, does not render void the importance of communal existence, neither does it negate the value of the human body. While the divine image, the point of contact between human beings and God, is not directly associated with the body but rather with the soul, heart, or mind, the body is nevertheless the shrine which contains this image and, as such, fulfills an important role in a person's spiritual existence.⁴⁵² As God's creation, the body is inherently good. If it appears to be the source of sin, it is important to realize that sin lies outside the body and is attributable, first and foremost, to demonic

⁴⁵¹ Lawson (1957), p. 15.

⁴⁵² Crouzel (1989), p. 91.

thoughts that cloud the mind and give rise to sins of the flesh. According to Origen, sins of the flesh imply a profanation of the body.⁴⁵³

To better understand Origen's complex notion of the body, let us take another look at the theologian's anthropological teaching and pay special attention to his division of human nature into the three aspects, *pneuma* (spirit), *psyche* (soul), and *soma* (body). For Origen, the spirit is the divine element in human beings and is characterized by its continuity with the Hebrew *ruach*, which expresses the action of God. The spirit is a divine gift, the active aspect of grace, and, strictly speaking, not a part of the human personality.⁴⁵⁴

The division of the second constituent of human beings, the soul, into a higher and a lower aspect has already been noted in connection with our discussion of the *nous*. As was suggested at that point, the *nous*, *hegemonikon*, or *kardia* forms the higher aspect of the soul. Created in the image of God, it allows for participation in its model, the Logos, provided it has been adequately purified. The *nous* is the organ of the contemplative life. It bears the spiritual senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. It is also home to the human will which, Origen insists, is free. While the *pneuma* and the *nous* are two distinct aspects in Origen's system, they are intimately connected in that they express the two fundamental aspects of grace, the gift of God and the reception of this gift by the individual.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵³ Crouzel (1989), p. 91. In this instance, Origen is drawing on the following Pauline admonition to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? . . . But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! Every sin that a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor 6:15, 17-19).

⁴⁵⁴ Crouzel (1989), pp. 88-89.

⁴⁵⁵ Crouzel (1989), p. 89.

The lower element of the soul was introduced with the fall, which marks the beginning of the soul's ongoing temptation to turn away from the spirit and yield to physical desires and attractions. This aspect of the *psyche* is the source of human instincts and passions. Origen refers to it by various names, such as *thumos* (anger), *epithumia* (covetousness), and *sarx*. While the former two designations are of Platonic origin, the latter is coined by Paul. Unlike *soma* (body), *sarx* (flesh) always has a pejorative sense:

And now, I think, we must not pass over in silence the 'human temptations', those which occasionally arise from 'flesh and blood', or from 'the wisdom of flesh and blood', which is said to be at enmity with God. . . . When therefore it is said that 'the flesh warreth against the spirit', these persons understand the passage thus, that the use of the needs or delights of the flesh excite a man and draw and entice him away from divine and spiritual things.⁴⁵⁶

Because of the touch, so to speak, of what is called the Holy Spirit upon their soul they possessed clear mental vision and became more radiant in their soul, and even in body, which no longer offered any opposition to the life lived according to virtue, in that it was mortified according to 'the mind of the flesh' as we call it.⁴⁵⁷

Although subject to the temptations of the flesh, the body is not intrinsically evil. Indeed, Origen suggests that "it is not true that *the matter which dwells among mortals* is responsible for evils. Each person's mind is responsible for the evil which exists in him, and this is what evil is."⁴⁵⁸ Evil has its source in "the wicked suggestions of the opposing spirit,"⁴⁵⁹ and, if unchecked by the mind, or the heart, finds expression in uncontrollable urges of the flesh. Distracting, inflammatory thoughts that afflict the body can be overcome, however, if ascetics practice watchfulness, self-awareness, and self-control:

We must bear in mind, however, that nothing else happens to us as a result of these good or evil thoughts which are suggested to our heart but a mere agitation and excitement which urges us on to deeds either of good or of evil. It is possible for us, when an evil

⁴⁵⁶ Origen, *PArch* 3.4.1, 4, in Butterworth (1973), p. 230, 235.

⁴⁵⁷ Origen, *CCels* 7.4, in Chadwick (1965), p. 397.

⁴⁵⁸ Origen, *CCels* 4.66, in Chadwick (1965), p. 237.

⁴⁵⁹ Origen, *HomNum* 27.12, in Greer (1979), p. 265.

power has begun to urge us on to a deed of evil, to cast away the wicked suggestions and to resist the low enticements and to do absolutely nothing worthy of blame.⁴⁶⁰

Because the soul is the seat of the free will, because humans have power of choice, they are able to resist physical temptation. Given great astuteness of inner thought processes and of their physical manifestations, humans can learn to check untoward stirrings and choose to follow the guidance of the spirit. By doing so, the soul becomes increasingly spiritual, even in its lower element,⁴⁶¹ and the body remains undefiled by the urges of the flesh. If, on the other hand, the will of the soul succumbs to the influence of evil and yields to its enticements, humans experience the corruption of the soul as well as of the body and invite their own death. Origen is emphatic that the will plays a decisive role in determining human fate:

If this is so, it is plain that the will of this soul is something intermediate between the flesh and the spirit, undoubtedly serving and obeying one of the two, whichever it has chosen to obey. If it gives itself up to the delights of the flesh, it makes men fleshly; if, however, it joins itself to the spirit, it causes a man to be 'in the spirit' and on this account to be called spiritual. It is this that the apostle seems to indicate when he says, 'Ye are not in the flesh, but in the spirit'.⁴⁶²

Given the power of the will and its ability to align itself consciously with the spirit, even in the presence of mental and physical distraction, the body does not pose a hindrance to the ascetical life. While its materiality no doubt limits the possibilities of the soul, Origen sees great justice and mercy in God's decision to place the fallen soul within the temporary limits of a particular material body. As Peter Brown succinctly writes:

For Origen, the fall of each individual spirit into a particular body had not been in any way a cataclysm; to be placed in a body was to experience a positive act of divine mercy. He distanced himself from many of his contemporaries by insisting that the body was necessary for the slow healing of the soul. It was only by pressing against the limitations imposed by a specific material environment that the spirit would learn to recover its earliest yearning to stretch beyond itself, to open itself "ever more fully and more

⁴⁶⁰ Origen, *PArch* 3.2.4, in Butterworth (1973), p. 217.

⁴⁶¹ Crouzel (1989), p. 88.

⁴⁶² Origen, *PArch* 3.4.2, in Butterworth (1973), p. 233.

warmly” to the love of God. The body posed a challenge that counteracted the numb sin of self-satisfaction. . . .The gentle precision of God’s mercy ensured that each body was adjusted to the peculiar needs of its soul down to the finest details, much as the lines of each person’s handwriting remained unmistakably their own.⁴⁶³

According to Origen, God has foreknowledge of all the differences that arise among souls and, based on these differences, endows each soul with a bodily covering suited to its specific circumstances and needs. By being placed in a body and being exposed to the limitations of embodied existence, the soul receives vital instruction in the most important of virtues, humility. The body’s rhythms and demands are uniquely suited to mentoring the proud soul and to exposing it to the many trials which alone allow for its gradual transformation.⁴⁶⁴ Embodiment is a divine gift that sets the soul on its path toward health. It inflicts limitation and suffering and, by doing so, presents the soul with the opportunity to grow, evolve, and attain perfection.

In the attempt to establish Origen’s regard for the body and his belief in its importance as an instrument of mystical ascent, it is also helpful to recall his *logoi* doctrine. As was suggested earlier, Origen’s teaching on the *logoi* validates the essential goodness of material existence by proposing that all created things bear within themselves the imprint of the Logos, their Creator. Visible things are partial expressions of the Logos; they display elements of the divine. Visible things point the way toward the heavenly realm and allow humans to catch a glimpse of the world to come.

Origen emphasizes the inherent goodness of embodied existence by applying this principle to the body and by proposing that the ethereal body, with which intellects were clothed before the fall, that is, before their ardor cooled and they were reduced to souls,

⁴⁶³ Brown (1988), pp. 164-166.

⁴⁶⁴ Brown (1988), p. 237.

survives in the earthly body in the form of the *logos*, the rational principle.⁴⁶⁵ At the resurrection, the *logos* of the physical body will be transfigured to form the body of glory.

It will shed material nature and assume its former heavenly quality:

When the universe has been subjected to Christ and through Christ to God, with whom it becomes 'one spirit' in view of the fact that rational beings are spirits, then also the bodily substance itself, being united to the best and purest spirits, will be changed, in proportion to the quality or merits of those who wear it, into an ethereal condition, according to the apostle's saying, 'and we shall be changed', and will shine with light.⁴⁶⁶

According to Origen, the bodies of "those who are considered worthy of the resurrection of the dead become like the bodies of the angels, ethereal, a dazzling light."⁴⁶⁷ The mortal quality of the body will be changed into one that is divine.⁴⁶⁸ Together with the soul, it will participate in the life of Divinity. Like the soul, the body will be suffused by God's glory and know eternal life. While Origen's emphasis on the spiritualization of the body may seem to contradict his teaching on its inherent goodness, it is important to remember that, for him, the goal of the Christian struggle is not that the soul be delivered from its body but that soul and body together may be subsumed in spirit.⁴⁶⁹ Once the soul has attained likeness to God and is no longer in need of the gentle yet persistent chastisements inflicted by its material covering, the body fulfills its true purpose and serves as God's temple:

Do not think that just as *the belly is made for food and food for the belly*, that in the same way the body is made for intercourse. If you wish to understand the Apostle's train of reasoning, for what reason the body was made, then listen: it was made that it should be a temple to the Lord; that the soul, being holy and blessed, should act in it as if it were a priest serving before the Holy Spirit that dwells in you. In this manner, Adam had a body in Paradise; but in Paradise he did not 'know' Eve.⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁵ For Origen's teaching on the existence of ethereal bodies prior to the fall see, for instance, *PArch* 2.3.1, in Butterworth (1973), pp. 83-84. In this passage Origen asserts that absolute incorporeality is the privilege of the Trinity alone. See also Crouzel (1989), p. 91.

⁴⁶⁶ Origen, *PArch* 2.3.7 in Butterworth (1973), p. 93.

⁴⁶⁷ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 17.30, cited in Crouzel (1989), p. 251.

⁴⁶⁸ Origen, *CCels* 3.41, in Chadwick (1965), p. 156.

⁴⁶⁹ Mark Julian Edwards, *Origen Against Plato* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), p. 161.

⁴⁷⁰ Origen, *Fragments on 1 Corinthians* 29, cited in Brown (1988), p. 173.

If the *logos* of a created thing signals the inherent connection between the earthly and the heavenly sphere, so does the survival of the ethereal body in our present physical organism. Like the *logoi* of created things, the *logos* of the body bears witness to its creation in the image of God and its inherent goodness. While the terrestrial body is ever in danger of succumbing to physical temptation, it can be freed from the afflictions of the flesh if the will consciously aligns itself with the good. This choice presents the first step toward the spiritualization of the body which culminates in its illumination by heavenly light at the resurrection. At this point, body and soul alike experience their glorification; both have a distinct place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

With these thoughts in mind, we will conclude our discussion of Origen. Having outlined essential features of his mystical doctrine, we are now, hopefully, in a better position to evaluate its impact on the tradition of the prayer of the heart. With Origen originated the Christian doctrine of the soul's ascent into the presence of God and the division of this ascent into a threefold journey. This doctrine advanced nothing less than the progressive divinization of human beings and their participation, at the height of the quest, in the life of Divinity. Many subsequent teachers of inner prayer were to adopt this doctrine and while they expanded on it, they never abandoned Origen's fundamental axioms. The emphasis on purification and illumination through careful self-inquiry and the pursuit of wisdom would remain a cornerstone of later ascetical teachings as would the idea that it is through the purification of the soul's divine image, specifically, that intimate contact with God can be reestablished. Like Origen, his successors were to insist on the reality and immeasurable value of this inner image which insures that, at their

deepest level, human beings are linked to God and are able to enter into lasting relations with the heavenly sphere. Like Origen, later theologians believed that no endeavor is as conducive to the purification of this image and to the traversal of the mystical path as inner prayer.

With Origen, we also encounter a theologian who, despite his debt to the Greek philosophical tradition, remained deeply committed to Christianity's biblical heritage and its incarnational spirit. His devotion to the personalized Logos, to Christ, was fervent. For him, as for Syrian theologians of the following century, knowledge of God was a deeply felt experience and hinged on Christ's salvific enfleshment. By assuming a body, the Logos restored the spiritual orientation of the created order and reconciled it to God. Origen proposed that the divine Word continues its salvific involvement in human affairs on an ongoing basis by serving as Teacher and Physician to the individual soul. Through the mediating activity of the personalized Logos, humans continue to experience the transformation of their deepest selves, their hearts, into places of divine theophany and indwelling.

Origen's emphasis on the direct encounter with God in the heart, his conceptualization of worship in terms of an inner, spiritual act had profound implications for his understanding of the body and the church. If the heart is the altar on which Christians offer their pure prayer, the body is God's earthly temple. As such, it deserves the highest regard. This aspect of Origen's mystical teaching left a permanent mark on the ancient practice of inner prayer. So, too, did his belief that the transformation of the heart into a pure altar goes hand in hand with active service and communal involvement. Like members of the Syrian church, Origen insisted that Christians can approach the inner liturgical site only after they have been reconciled to fellow-beings. For him, compassion,

generosity, and neighborly love were at the very heart of a prayerful existence. Neither Origen nor his successors ever suggested that the inner glorification of God implied withdrawal from the world and isolation. While Origen knew the silent contemplation of God to be a vital part of ascetical existence, he insisted that this existence remain embedded in the Christian community. Origen's commitment to his priestly ministry bears lasting witness to this conviction.

Perhaps most striking about Origen's teaching is his ability to combine great intellectual astuteness and insight with heart-felt devotion to the personalized Logos. Drawing on his extensive knowledge of Greek philosophy and placing it at the service of the church and its central teaching on the incarnation, Origen articulated a doctrine that was intellectually stimulating and emotionally engaging. Familiarity with philosophical concepts enabled him to map a person's intrapsychic landscape with precision and to show how the successive stages of the mystical journey might best be traversed. Simultaneously, his deep devotion to the person of Christ and to the lived experience of the ascetical life allowed him to guide Christians toward a very personal, inner encounter with God. Despite his intellectual prowess and great learnedness, Origen insisted that the discernment of Divinity was never a matter of theoretical strivings but hinged at all times on experiential participation in the Christian message. In its emphasis on the affective experience of God's presence, his teaching often calls to mind the heart-centered approach commonly associated with the Syrian mystical current, a feature that allows us to see to how great a degree Origen relied on the biblical tradition of the heart to articulate his doctrine.

Origen's ability to combine intellectual astuteness with a heart-felt Jesus mysticism indicates that elements of the two early Christian mystical currents can be

reconciled with ease and grace. It suggests that Origen and fellow-members of the early church articulated a doctrine that moves along a continuum, extending from the Semitic to the Hellenic poles of ancient mystical thought, and that they did so without being locked into either extreme. Origen, for his part, was more likely to draw on Greek terminology to present his understanding of the soul's progression into the presence of God. As our discussion has hopefully shown, this did not mean that he was unaware of biblical heart language or that he perpetuated a rift between Christianity's two prominent legacies. On the contrary, his ascetical writings are a constant reminder of how the concept of the heart-felt encounter with God and of the illumination of the *nous* might fruitfully be brought into accord.

Let us conclude this discussion of Origen's mystical doctrine by establishing the value of his legacy to contemporary Christians, a task we can conduct readily and confidently. Origen's ability to reconcile the intellectual and the experiential aspects of the mystical life is of great benefit to modern religious seekers for suggesting that today's division between doctrinal and mystical theology, between theology and spirituality, marks a distinction that was far from the minds of early Christian theologians. For Origen, the two expressions of Christian teaching represented vital and inseparable aspects of a doctrine that seeks nothing less than to provide humans with the possibility of attaining to the fullness of the mystical union.⁴⁷¹ To the extent to which Origen insisted that this union is always participatory in nature and facilitated by the church, his ascetical teaching strengthens contemporary Christians in their conviction that only visceral knowledge of God allows for lasting peace and that the church is the earthly institution

⁴⁷¹ Lossky (1998), p. 10.

designed to guide them toward such knowledge. Origen is a powerful ally to all modern Christians who seek a means of perceiving the inner presence of Divinity without having to look beyond their own tradition. Few early Christian theologians would have been as quick as Origen to suggest that the church has lost sight of its essential calling the moment it fails to guide its members toward the heart-felt encounter with God.

In Origen, contemporary Christians may also know a powerful advocate of holistic biblical teaching. In his presence, they need not fear exposure to a gospel of dualism or otherworldliness which they are unable to reconcile with their own worldly existence. Origen's mystical doctrine provides them with a teaching that negates neither the importance of the body nor of communal involvement. In their quest for divine intimacy, religious seekers need not divorce the mind from the body, nor do they have to transcend the inherently relational nature of human existence. According to Origen, the soul cannot attain perfection apart from the body. Individuals cannot be reconciled to God unless they are reconciled to one another. Given the Origenian understanding that the process of purification, illumination, and perfection depends on embodied, communal existence and that it can be experienced by all Christians, even by those deeply involved in the world, contemporary non-monastic individuals may know that they, too, are able to engage in the mystical life. If they are prepared to conduct daily tasks in the hope of glorifying God, if they are willing to fashion themselves after their divine model and to imitate the Lord's many charitable deeds, they, too, are able to transform their hearts into a liturgical site and to become priests of Christ.

Evagrius of Pontus

Evagrius of Pontus (345-399) was Origen's most devoted follower and instrumental in bequeathing to posterity many prominent features of his teacher's mystical doctrine. A disciple of the Cappadocians and one of the brightest theologians of his generation, Evagrius was a skillful interpreter of the human psyche, and he devoted much of his later life—once he had settled in the Egyptian desert—to the recording of his insights into intrapsychic processes. His close contact with the first generation of desert fathers, including Macarius of Alexandria, his spiritual father, as well as his theological learnedness uniquely qualified him to offer practical guidance on the many aspects of the ascetical life, including the controlling of psychological states, the taxonomy of virtues and vices, and the discernment of spirits. Despite his posthumous condemnation at the Council of Constantinople II in 553, Evagrius's mystical doctrine exerted a lasting influence over the prayer of the heart.⁴⁷²

Given Evagrius's loyalty to the Origenian legacy, the upcoming pages will address many concepts previously explored in our discussion of Origen. The Evagrian doctrine of the soul's triadic ascent into the presence of God, of the divine image, of the five spiritual senses, and of the presence of *logoi* in the ontological fabric of the cosmos are but some teachings that will strike a familiar chord. If we begin our discussion with the last of these teachings, Evagrius's understanding of *logoi* as seeds of divine presence in the cosmic

⁴⁷² McGuckin (2004b), "Evagrius of Pontus," p. 133.

order, we will have a first opportunity to observe just how pervasive an influence Origen exerted over the ascetical theology of his disciple. By starting our discussion with this particular teaching, we will also be in a good position to gain a deeper understanding of Evagrius's conception of the mystical path.

Like Origen, Evagrius conceives of *logoi* as the rational principles or inner meanings of created things. The *logos* of a created thing expresses the purpose of Divinity. It is the reason why a thing exists in the scheme of God's providence and judgment.⁴⁷³ By contemplating the 'divine book' of creation and discerning the true nature of things, individuals are able to detect, as it were, the fingerprints of God's abiding presence in the world. They are able to perceive the inherent order of the universe.

Since *logoi* are imprints of the Logos, the Creator of the cosmos, ascetics who meditate on the rational principles of things are given the privileged opportunity of contemplating partial aspects of the divine Logos, the one who is perceptible through the multiplicity of beings.⁴⁷⁴ Given time, practice, and effort, partial knowledge of the Logos through the contemplation of a thing's spiritual essence gives way to knowledge of the Logos through direct contemplation. The more adept humans become in discerning, first, the Logos's divine imprints in the universe and, thereafter, the presence of the Logos itself, the greater their ability to ascend from peripheral to archetypal reality.

Evagrius is adamant that the first step toward the discernment of archetypal reality is commitment to the virtuous life. He writes:

⁴⁷³ Jeremy Driscoll, *Steps to Spiritual Perfection: Studies on Spiritual Progress in Evagrius Ponticus* (New York: Newman Press, 2005), p. 41.

⁴⁷⁴ Luke Dysinger, *Psalmody and Prayer in the Writings of Evagrius Ponticus* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 98.

We practice the virtues in order to achieve contemplation of the inner essences (*logoi*) of created things, and from this we pass to contemplation of the Logos who gives them their being.⁴⁷⁵

Evagrius points to the virtuous life as a vital prerequisite for the contemplation of a thing's *logos* in the full awareness that enslavement to vice prevents a person from engaging in such contemplation and, hence, from acquiring greater knowledge of God. He bases this observation on the understanding that devious behavior is caused by evil thoughts, or *logismoi*, which are instilled by cunning demons in the human mind with the sole intention of distracting the mind to such a degree as to prevent its meditation on the *logoi*. The wish to guide ascetics away from affliction by *logismoi* toward the contemplation of the deep-down reality of the cosmos and, eventually, toward the contemplation of Divinity itself is at the heart of Evagrius's teaching on the triadic mystical path. We will now take a look at this important Evagrian doctrine.

In his discussion of the quest for God, Evagrius follows Origen's lead by taking as his starting-point the idea that the *nous* is a person's center of spiritual intelligence and the locus of the Logos's divine image. For Evagrius, the *nous* is pure spirit in its original state and, even after the fall, remains a wholly spiritual reality. While it expands to include the soul in the form of an outgrowth or addition, the *nous* is not an integral part of the soul as is the case in Origen's anthropological teaching. Rather, it remains a distinct intrapsychic entity.⁴⁷⁶

Like his third century predecessor, Evagrius suggests that the original purity and radiance of the *nous*'s divine image was lost at the fall and that it is in dire need of

⁴⁷⁵ Evagrius, *Prayer* 52, in *Philokalia* 1, pp. 61-62.

⁴⁷⁶ Michael O'Laughlin, "Elements of Fourth Century Origenism: The Anthropology of Evagrius Ponticus and Its Sources," in Kannengiesser and Petersen (1988), pp. 364-365.

purification. The process of purification is no small matter and forces human beings to become increasingly aware of the many-varied *logismoi* which, as mentioned above, are the device of ever-resourceful demons seeking to distract the mind and to prevent its deep mediation on the *logoi*. Only if humans submit to a rigorous set of physical and noetic ascetical practices and learn to control distracting thoughts and the thwarted behaviors to which they give rise (most notably, gluttony, lust, avarice, dejection, anger, listlessness, vainglory, and pride),⁴⁷⁷ can they hope to attain a clearer vision of God's all-pervasive cosmic presence.

Evagrius is also indebted to Origen for the division of the mystical path into a threefold progression. Replacing Origen's choice of words, *ethike*, *physike*, and *enoptike*, with the terms *praktike*, *physike*, and *theoria*, he proposes that the first stage of the journey, the stage of *praktike*, is concerned with the active life which begins with repentance and the radical conversion of the soul toward God. Like his teacher, Evagrius points to the importance of stilling the mind, of overcoming disordered impulses, and of acquiring greater virtue. He cautions fellow-ascetics that "the demon is very envious of us when we pray, and uses every kind of trick to thwart our purpose. Therefore, he is always using our memory to stir up thoughts of various things and our flesh to arouse the passions, in order to obstruct our way of ascent to God."⁴⁷⁸

As a means of cutting short the maneuvers of God's adversaries, Evagrius advises monks to watch carefully over the two lower parts of the human soul, desire (*epithumia*) and incensive power (*thumos*). Desire, he suggests, is best destroyed through fasting, vigils, and sleeping on the ground, while a person's incensive power may be tamed

⁴⁷⁷ Evagrius's eight types of *logismoi* were reformulated and presented by John Cassian as the seven deadly sins. See Ware (1997), pp. 397-398.

⁴⁷⁸ Evagrius, *Prayer* 47, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 61.

through long-suffering, forbearance, forgiveness, and acts of compassion.⁴⁷⁹ If religious seekers engage in these practices with compunction and heart-felt grief for past sins, they are able to calm their agitated minds and to achieve freedom from passion, or *apatheia*. They enter a state in which mental distraction and physical temptation cease to compromise the intellect's natural tranquility. With the onset of *apatheia* at the height of the first stage, the mind is able to focus all of its awareness on God.⁴⁸⁰

The ability to enter a state of dispassion and stillness, which is essential to the discernment of Divinity, is deepened by training in noetic comprehension and contemplation throughout the second stage of the mystical journey, the stage of *physike*. Now in control of impassioned thoughts and master of the soul's two lower elements, the mind is free to devote itself to the contemplation of the inner principles of created things, a task that, as we have seen, is vital to the progressive discernment of the Logos. The trying battle to clear away the *logismoi* has been won, granting ascetics the freedom to explore the spiritual essence of the cosmic order. "Whereas the impure have no insight into these essences, and . . . will fail because of the great clouds of dust and the turmoil aroused by their passions at the time of battle,"⁴⁸¹ individuals who have entered the second stage of the mystical quest and who have begun to discern the all-pervasive presence of Divinity by meditating on the cosmic order draw one step closer to knowledge of God.

While it is essential for monks to discern the divine presence through the works of creation, the next task at hand is to approach Divinity directly. The contemplation of created things is still described by a form of meditation that impresses upon the intellect

⁴⁷⁹ Evagrius, *Disc 3*, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 39.

⁴⁸⁰ Louth (1981), pp. 106-108.

⁴⁸¹ Evagrius, *Disc 20*, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 50.

the many shapes of the realm of multiplicity. The contemplation of God, however, implies meditation on absolute unity:

If the intellect has not risen above the contemplation of the created world, it has not yet beheld the realm of God perfectly. For it may be occupied with the knowledge of intelligible things and so involved in their multiplicity.⁴⁸²

To behold the realm of God perfectly, the mind has to enter a state of inner silence, or *hesychia*, in which concepts about God are replaced by a sense of Divinity's immediate presence. Evagrius refers to this state of interior silence and uninterrupted contemplation of Deity as the state of pure prayer. It constitutes the summit of the mystical journey, the stage of *theoria*, and is characterized by the transcendence of all thought:

Never try to see a form or shape during prayer.⁴⁸³

I shall say again what I have said elsewhere: blessed is the intellect that is completely free from forms during prayer.⁴⁸⁴

Christians who engage in pure prayer will not permit their intellects to "be stamped with the impress of any form but approach the Immaterial in an immaterial manner."⁴⁸⁵ Divinity is a mystery beyond words and understanding and, hence, discernible only if the *nous* contemplates it without resorting to human concepts, words, and images.⁴⁸⁶ At the summit of the mystical quest, contemplation is absolutely simple. Having regained its pure, original state, the *nous* is able to contemplate Divinity

⁴⁸² Evagrius, *Prayer* 58, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 62.

⁴⁸³ Evagrius, *Prayer* 114, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 68.

⁴⁸⁴ Evagrius, *Prayer* 117, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 68.

⁴⁸⁵ Evagrius, *Prayer* 67, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 63.

⁴⁸⁶ Ware (1997), p. 399.

directly.⁴⁸⁷ Awareness of the subject-object differentiation recedes and the mind is filled with a sense of all-embracing unity:

When like torrents to the sea the minds return to him, he completely changes them to his own nature, colour and taste: in his endless and inseparable unity, they will be one and no longer many, since they will be united and joined to him.⁴⁸⁸

In undistracted prayer, the *nous* engages in the highest noetic activity possible and fixes all of its attention on God.⁴⁸⁹ Its pure state is marred by nothing that might leave an imprint on its fabric and prevent union with Divinity. Although this experience is transient, for only the mind that is separated from the body and wholly naked can sustain this state of pure, immaterial prayer,⁴⁹⁰ it allows humans to touch upon divine life and to reflect the glory of Divinity.⁴⁹¹

Judging by this initial outline of Evagrius's mystical doctrine, it would appear that there is much evidence to support its classification as a highly abstract, speculative teaching. Elements of Evagrius's metaphysics, such as references to the soul's formless, intellectual contemplation of God or to prayer as the mind's highest possible intellection, can be detected throughout his mystical writings. Evagrius's emphasis on the rigorous implementation of ascetical practices to control the lower parts of the human soul as well as his emphasis on the attainment of *apatheia*, a state which, although descriptive of the transformation and redirection of the passions,⁴⁹² is often interpreted in terms of their

⁴⁸⁷ Evagrius, *Prayer* 3, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 57.

⁴⁸⁸ Evagrius, *EM* 28, in Augustine Casiday, *Evagrius Ponticus* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 69.

⁴⁸⁹ Dysinger (2005), p. 99.

⁴⁹⁰ Louth (1981), p. 111.

⁴⁹¹ Evagrius, *Disc* 18, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 49.

⁴⁹² Ware (1997), p. 398.

suppression may seem further proof of the idea that, for him, the quest for God is characterized by a noetic ascent from flesh.

While parts of Evagrius's thought are indeed highly speculative, we cannot gain a balanced picture of his mystical doctrine without taking into consideration the close contact he harbored with the earliest Egyptian desert fathers, a contact that allowed him to adopt a very practical, experiential approach to the ascetical life. If we heed this aspect of Evagrius's legacy and acknowledge his impact as spiritual guide on fellow-ascetics, we stand a better chance of looking beyond Evagrius, the brilliant, albeit exceedingly cerebral Origenian systematician to Evagrius, the man who was deeply committed to the personal, interior encounter with God.⁴⁹³

In the hope of presenting a balanced reading of Evagrius's mystical doctrine, it is important to look to writings that suggest a more favorable reading of embodied, communal existence and that allow us to see how important Evagrius deemed such an existence to the attainment of divine knowledge. As we do so, we soon come to realize that this fourth century theologian is as careful as Origen not to divorce his mystical doctrine from the incarnational spirit of Christianity and to accord to Christ, the divine Physician and Reconciler, pride of place in his system.⁴⁹⁴ For Origen and Evagrius alike, mystical knowledge is inextricably linked to the imitation of Christ and to the flowering of love. Mystical knowledge implies close adherence to the Christian life and to all that it entails, including neighborly charity and service. Like Origen, Evagrius never reduces the contemplation of God to an intellectual pursuit. Human beings apprehend Divinity

⁴⁹³ For comments on the importance of considering Evagrius, the man and spiritual guide, see *Evagrius of Pontus. Briefe aus der Wüste*, trans. Gabriel Bunge (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1986), pp. 17-21. See also Casiday (2006), pp. 25-28.

⁴⁹⁴ See, for instance, Evagrius, *Disc 3*, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 40.

intuitively and are able to participate in divine life only if their quest is motivated by a deep longing to experience God's love on a heart-felt level. To explore this aspect of Evagrius's mystical doctrine more fully, let us start out by examining his use of biblical heart language. Let us also consider the degree to which recourse to such language infuses his doctrine with an intimate, devotional character and reveals to us Evagrius, the devout Christian and spiritual father rather than the abstract thinker.

To begin with, it is important to establish that Evagrius, like Origen, does not juxtapose the two expressions *nous* and *kardia* but views them as inherently compatible. While the compatibility of these two terms may be lost on readers who focus their attention primarily on his better known works, the study of writings commonly viewed as being of minor importance, such as his letters, his notes on Scripture, and the *Ad Monachos*, allows us to come to a better understanding of Evagrius's position on this particular matter.⁴⁹⁵ If we turn our attention to these sources, we soon come to realize that Evagrius makes ample use of biblical heart imagery and moves freely between the language of Scripture and the vocabulary of Platonic teaching. Let us consider a number of relevant passages:

It is only in front of wisdom that the demons are powerless because they are not able to throw evil thoughts into the heart (*kardian*) of one who has become wise. For the mind (*nous*) that is touched by the contemplations of wisdom becomes unreceptive to impure thoughts.⁴⁹⁶

Where evil enters in, there also ignorance; but the hearts (*kardiai*) of holy ones will be filled with knowledge.⁴⁹⁷

Better a fast with a pure heart (*kardias*) than a feast in impurity of soul (*psyches*).⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁵ Driscoll (2005), pp. 77-78.

⁴⁹⁶ Evagrius, *Schol Prov* 3.15, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 82.

⁴⁹⁷ Evagrius, *Monachos* 24, in *Evagrius Ponticus: Ad Monachos*, trans. Jeremy Driscoll (New York; Mahwah NJ: Newman Press, 2003), p. 45.

⁴⁹⁸ Evagrius, *Monachos* 44, in Driscoll (2003), p. 48.

The above passages allow us to observe quite clearly that Evagrius does not look to the heart and the mind as two distinct human faculties. For him, they stand in virtual apposition.⁴⁹⁹ Both expressions designate a person's fundamental instrument of contemplation. They indicate the inner dimension with which Christians meditate, first, on the *logoi* of created things and, eventually, on God. Here, sanctified humans have recourse to divine wisdom and knowledge. The last of the above passages allows us to observe that Evagrius includes in his list of compatible terms also the soul (*psyche*). Heart, mind, and soul alike serve as the place where Divinity is apprehended. Once this inner dimension has ceased to be afflicted by *logismoi* and has become absolutely still, absolutely simple, it rests in the presence of God.

The above citations further suggest that Evagrius is greatly concerned to emphasize the need for a wise and pure heart. Like so many early Christian ascetics, be they of the Greek-speaking or the Syriac-speaking world, he cannot conceive of perfection apart from inner purity and reintegration. Evagrius commonly refers to this state of being as *apatheia*. But the biblical term descriptive of this state, purity of heart, is not absent from his vocabulary:

Here he calls "gift" purity of heart (*kardias*), for it is in proportion to our passionlessness (*apatheias*) that we are judged worthy of knowledge.⁵⁰⁰

The compatibility of the two concepts is illustrated also in the following words. Although Evagrius here refers to the 'gentle' heart rather than to the 'pure' heart, the meaning remains the same:

In the gentle heart (*kardia*), wisdom will rest; a throne of passionlessness (*apatheias*): a soul accomplished in *praktike*.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁹ Driscoll (2005), p. 82.

⁵⁰⁰ Evagrius, *Schol Prov* 19.17, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 81.

⁵⁰¹ Evagrius, *Monachos* 31, in Driscoll (2003), p. 46.

According to Evagrian thought, the term *apatheia*, which the theologian borrows from the Stoic tradition, expresses the same state of existence as the biblical notion of the pure heart. Passionlessness and purity of heart are two ways of saying the same thing.⁵⁰² Both terms describe a state of being in which the instrument of contemplation, the heart or the mind, is no longer darkened by inflammatory thoughts. The two lower aspects of the soul have been calmed and contribute to the quest for divine knowledge. The concupiscible part desires virtue and knowledge, while the irascible part directs its anger at the *logismoi*.⁵⁰³ Ascetics are able to pray without distraction. Their purified hearts “understand the reasons of God.”⁵⁰⁴

If Evagrius makes frequent use of the notion of the pure heart, he also draws on the concept of the enlarged heart, a concept we already encountered in the work of Origen. Adhering to his teacher’s rendition of the phrase, Evagrius closely associates the enlarged heart with increase in knowledge. A heart that has been enlarged by purity is able to comprehend the maneuvers of demonic adversaries and to forestall the renewal of their attack.⁵⁰⁵ It is free to contemplate the essence of the created order and to touch on archetypal reality. The enlarged heart is also free to love. Evagrius insists that *agape* is the offspring of *apatheia*.⁵⁰⁶ A heart that is no longer bound by desire and passion is able to love.

⁵⁰² Driscoll (2005), p. 91.

⁵⁰³ Jeremy Driscoll, “*Apatheia* and Purity of Heart in Evagrius Ponticus,” in Luckman and Kulzer (1999), p. 145.

⁵⁰⁴ Evagrius, *Schol Prov* 22.20, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 86.

⁵⁰⁵ Louth (1981), p. 107.

⁵⁰⁶ Evagrius, *Prak* 81, in *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, trans. Robert E. Sinkewicz (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 110.

Evagrius's emphasis on a pure, enlarged heart and on its close link with love does much to dispel the claim that he favors the intellectual interpretation of Christianity's teaching over its daily, practical application. Indeed, if we take a closer look at his teaching on love, we come to realize how vital a role love plays in his conception of the ascetical life. Love unites the active and the contemplative aspects of the mystical journey by serving as the goal of the practical life and as the doorway to contemplation.⁵⁰⁷ Love alone allows ascetics to acquire divine knowledge and to draw closer to God. It is the only way of attaining knowledge of God:

Faith: the beginning of love. The end of love: knowledge of God.⁵⁰⁸

The idea that love leads to divine knowledge does not imply that Evagrius subordinates the former to the latter. On the contrary,

Through love the mind sees Original Love, God. Through our love we see the love of God for us.⁵⁰⁹

For Evagrius, love is the essence of God.⁵¹⁰ Hence, knowledge of God implies knowledge of Original Love. Guided by the axiom that only like can know like, Evagrius proposes that the loving heart alone can know Original Love. He further proposes that the divine source of all earthly love is revealed to humankind in Christ, a teaching that implies that any person who sins against love sins against Christ, he who manifests Original Love.⁵¹¹

The Evagrian notion that love is manifested and exemplified by the Logos incarnate suggests that humans express their love by imitating Christ. To love is to live in

⁵⁰⁷ Bunge (1986), p. 130.

⁵⁰⁸ Evagrius, *Monachos* 3, in Driscoll (2003), p. 41.

⁵⁰⁹ Evagrius, *Ep* 56.3, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 42; Bunge (1986), p. 272.

⁵¹⁰ Evagrius, *EM* 12-14, in Casiday (2006), p. 67.

⁵¹¹ Evagrius, *Ep* 40.3, in Bunge (1986), p. 255.

accordance with the Lord's teaching. To love implies an existence guided by gentleness. Borrowing from the Gospel passage "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:28-29), Evagrius establishes an inherent connection between the gentle heart of devout Christians and the gentle heart of the Lord. By imitating Christ and his many charitable deeds, human beings draw ever closer to the image according to which they were fashioned:

If you imitate Christ, you will become blessed. Your soul will die his death, and it will not derive evil from its flesh. Instead, your exodus will be like the exodus of a star, and your resurrection will glow like the sun.⁵¹²

For Evagrius, the imitation of divine love and gentleness is the defining characteristic of the blessed. Indeed, it is better to be "a gentle worldly man than an irascible and wrathful monk."⁵¹³ Love and gentleness mark the true disciple of Christ. They are at the heart of the ascetical life:

One who does not possess kindness and love towards his brother, how could he be a member of Christ-bearing love? When a brother visits you during your intense fast and practice of stillness, do not accept the odiousness of thoughts that suggest disturbance of your stillness and interruption of your fast. . . . Let us not speak of the frequent visits of the brothers as disturbances, but rather let us trust their community as a helpful alliance against the phalanx of the adversary; for thus united by the charm of charity, we shall expel wickedness and transfer the world of manual labor into the treasury of hospitality.⁵¹⁴

Like Aphrahat, who so poignantly suggests the superiority of neighborly charity over formal prayer,⁵¹⁵ Evagrius proposes that compassion and gentleness rather than the rigorous observance of ascetical practices enable humans to model themselves after

⁵¹² Evagrius, *Monachos* 21, in Driscoll (2003), p. 44.

⁵¹³ Evagrius, *Monachos* 34, in Driscoll (2003), p. 47.

⁵¹⁴ Evagrius, *Eul* 24.25, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 51.

⁵¹⁵ Aphrahat, *Dem* 4.14, in Brock (1987), p. 20.

Christ and to attain knowledge of God: "Out of gentleness, knowledge is born."⁵¹⁶ The gentle heart sees God.⁵¹⁷ For Evagrius, this teaching is epitomized by Moses, he who was more gentle and humble than anyone else on earth (Num 12:3) and who was therefore permitted to speak to God face to face, as though to a friend (Ex 33:11).⁵¹⁸

Evagrius is well aware that communal existence does not only forge a "helpful alliance"⁵¹⁹ but holds numerous challenges. He knows that "it is not possible to love all the brothers equally."⁵²⁰ Since the demons never cease to scheme against the soul, the struggle to act kindly toward the neighbor continues until death.⁵²¹ Even so, Evagrius does not waver in his emphasis on the importance of communal living. The relational context of the Christian life provides the testing ground on which religious seekers meet the many challenges of daily existence. Only by facing these challenges and by committing to a life of compassion and practical charity can the heart be transformed:

If your brother irritates you, lead him into your house, and do not hesitate to go into his, but eat your morsel with him. For doing this, you will deliver your soul and there will be no stumbling block for you at the hour of prayer.⁵²²

He who is merciful to the poor destroys irascibility, and he who cares for them will be filled with good things.⁵²³

He who does not care for the sick will not see the light.⁵²⁴

If your brother is sad, console him; and if he is pained, share the pain. For doing thus, you will gladden his heart, and you will store a great treasure in heaven.⁵²⁵

⁵¹⁶ Evagrius, *Monachos* 99, in Driscoll (2003), p. 58.

⁵¹⁷ Bunge (1986), p. 137.

⁵¹⁸ Evagrius, *Ep* 27.2, in Bunge (1986), p. 239.

⁵¹⁹ Evagrius, *Eul* 24.25, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 51.

⁵²⁰ Evagrius, *Prak* 100, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 113.

⁵²¹ Evagrius, *Prak* 36, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 104.

⁵²² Evagrius, *Monachos* 15, in Driscoll (2003), p. 43.

⁵²³ Evagrius, *Monachos* 30, in Driscoll (2003), p. 46.

⁵²⁴ Evagrius, *Monachos* 77, in Driscoll (2003), p. 54.

⁵²⁵ Evagrius, *Monachos* 87, in Driscoll (2003), p. 56.

Following Origen's lead, Evagrius also insists that the sanctified ascetic must share in the angels' work of mediation by praying for fellow-humans, by aiding them in their spiritual struggle, and by seeking their cure.⁵²⁶ Spiritual progress entails responsibility toward the neighbor:

It is right to pray not only for your own purification, but also for that of all your fellow men, and so to imitate the angels.⁵²⁷

Whoever will have obtained spiritual knowledge will help the holy angels and will return reasoning souls from vice to virtue and from ignorance to knowledge.⁵²⁸

We should honour our elders like the angels, for it is they who anoint us for the struggles and who heal the wounds inflicted by the wild beasts.⁵²⁹

Ascetics who are no longer in the throes of passion, who can discern the spiritual nature of creation, and who have attained the state of pure prayer are uniquely qualified to serve as physicians and teachers to members of their community. If Christ, the divine Physician, "corrects our incensive power through acts of compassion [and] purifies the intellect through prayer,"⁵³⁰ Christians who have been formed according to the new Adam seek to effect the spiritual advancement of their neighbors in much the same way.

Evagrius's emphasis on the primacy of love and on its manifestation through acts of charity, healing, and instruction is strongly reminiscent of ascetical teachings presented by Origen and by fourth century Syrian Christians. For all of these theologians, the ascetical life is inextricably linked to active service and ethical conduct. Neighborly love

⁵²⁶ Dysinger (2005), p. 45.

⁵²⁷ Evagrius, *Prayer* 40, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 60.

⁵²⁸ Evagrius, GC 6.90, cited in Dysinger, p. 45.

⁵²⁹ Evagrius, *Prak* 100, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 113.

⁵³⁰ Evagrius, *Disc* 3, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 40.

is the quintessential means of entering into the presence of God. For Evagrius, it is better to be "the thousandth in love than one alone with hate in inaccessible caves."⁵³¹

Likewise strongly reminiscent of Origen and theologians of the early Syrian church is Evagrius's commitment to the use of ecclesial and liturgical imagery, especially as it is expressed in the Old Testament language of Exodus (Ex 19, 24). Like fellow early Christians, Evagrius makes repeated use of the account describing the theophany at Sinai, an account greatly influenced by biblical temple imagery and paradigmatic of descriptions relating God's revelation to humankind.⁵³² In the following passage, Evagrius's reference to the *nous* as a sacred space which shines like a sapphire is a clear borrowing from Exodus 24:10:

When the intellect has shed its fallen state and acquired the state of grace, then during prayer it will see its own nature like a sapphire or the colour of heaven. In Scripture this is called the realm of God that was seen by the elders on Mount Sinai.⁵³³

The above words attest to Evagrius's importance as a key player in the interiorization of the biblical glory tradition.⁵³⁴ So, too, do various other passages throughout his corpus in which he reconceptualizes the temple motif by pointing to the pure mind (or, as discussed, the pure heart) as God's earthly dwelling-place. The mind is the new Christian temple:

From the holy David we have learned clearly what the place of God is; for he says, 'His place has been established in peace and his dwelling on Sion' (Ps. 75:3). Therefore, the place of God is the rational soul, and his dwelling the luminous mind that has renounced worldly desires and has been taught to observe the reasons of (that which is on) the earth.⁵³⁵

⁵³¹ Evagrius, *Monachos* 9, in Driscoll (2003), p. 42.

⁵³² Golitzin (1994), p. 155.

⁵³³ Evagrius, *Disc* 18, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 49.

⁵³⁴ As pointed out by Séd, Evagrius is one of the first Christian theologians to interiorize the encounter of Moses and the elders with God on Mount Sinai, see Nicolas Séd, "La Shekinta et ses amis arameens," *Cahiers d'Orientalisme* XX (Geneva: P. Cramer, 1988), pp. 240-242.

⁵³⁵ Evagrius, *GC* 25, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 213.

The mind is the temple of the Holy Trinity.⁵³⁶

The pure mind is an incense burner at the time of prayer when it touches upon no sensible object. According to virtue we will be one on the eighth day, according to knowledge, on the last day.⁵³⁷

With a prophetic eye, he saw the rational nature elevated through ascetic struggle and receiving in itself the knowledge of God, since God is said to be 'seated' where he is known and therefore the pure mind is called 'God's throne'.⁵³⁸

As we discuss Evagrius's vital role in the spiritualization of the temple motif, it is important to note that he is as committed as Origen and Syrian ascetical writers to the idea that the interiorization of worship does not call into question the importance of the church. While inner prayer allows Christians to commune directly with God, the mystical quest nevertheless depends on the sacramental and communal life provided by the body of Christ. Evagrius's commitment to the church and its representatives is unwavering:

The one agitating the church of the Lord, fire will completely consume him. The one resisting a priest, the earth will swallow him up.⁵³⁹

One should love the priests after the Lord, for they purify us through the sacred mysteries and pray on our behalf.⁵⁴⁰

Likewise, it is important to reiterate that Evagrius's reinterpretation of the temple image in terms of an inner, spiritual reality is never divorced from neighborly love and charitable deeds. For him, "the light which shines in the holy temples is a symbol of spiritual knowledge . . . which is fed by the oil of holy love."⁵⁴¹ The heart cannot be transformed into a place of divine indwelling if the teachings and deeds of Christ remain unheeded. The idea that spiritual worship is intimately related to the transcendence of strife is expressed also in the following words:

⁵³⁶ Evagrius, *GC* 34, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 214.

⁵³⁷ Evagrius, *GC* 6, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 211.

⁵³⁸ Evagrius, *Thoughts* 41, in Casiday (2006), p. 115.

⁵³⁹ Evagrius, *Monachos* 114, in Driscoll (2003), p. 61.

⁵⁴⁰ Evagrius, *Prak* 100, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 113.

⁵⁴¹ Evagrius, *GC* 4.25, cited in Driscoll (2005), p. 46.

If He who is in want of nothing and shows no favours did not receive the man coming with a gift to the altar until he was reconciled with his neighbor who had something against him (cf. Matt. 5:23-24), consider how much we must be on guard and use discrimination if we are to offer at the spiritual altar incense that is acceptable to God.⁵⁴²

Despite Evagrius's commitment to the spiritualization of Christian worship, it is thus notable that his ascetical doctrine always remains grounded in the communal life of the church. Evagrius cannot conceive of the mystical life apart from interpersonal relationships, ethical conduct, and neighborly love. The quest for God bears fruit because members of the body of Christ enter into close relations. For him, the mystical journey is inherently mutual, communal, and practical. It is also inherently egalitarian:

By means of these virtues [of compassion, prayer, and fasting], the new Adam is formed, made again according to the image of his Creator—an Adam in whom, thanks to dispassion, there is 'neither male nor female' and, thanks to singleness of faith, there is 'neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free; but Christ is all, and in all' (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:10-11).⁵⁴³

If Evagrius cannot conceive of the quest for God apart from the community of the church and its constant striving to emulate the peaceful, egalitarian nature of the heavenly realm, he can neither conceive of the mystical quest apart from the physical body. Indeed, as we turn to examine his notion of human embodiment, we come to realize, once again, that Evagrius is by no means the cerebral intellectual or crypto-Gnostic he is often made out to be.⁵⁴⁴ For him, our embodied state is an essential aspect of Christian existence. Evagrius insists that the body *per se* is not an evil:

Those who in their wickedness nourish the flesh and 'make provision for it to gratify its desires' (Rom. 13:14)—let them blame themselves and not the flesh. For they know the grace of the Creator, those who have attained impassibility of the soul through this body and perceive to some degree the contemplation of beings.⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴² Evagrius, *Prayer* 147, in *Philokalia* 1, pp. 70-71.

⁵⁴³ Evagrius, *Disc* 3, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 40.

⁵⁴⁴ Plested (2004), p. 66.

⁵⁴⁵ Evagrius, *Prak* 53, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 107.

According to Evagrius, the body is our God-given vehicle of mystical ascent. Rather than hinder the *nous* in the attainment of divine knowledge, it facilitates the process.⁵⁴⁶ Aided by the body, the intellect attains impassibility, contemplates the nature of the created order, and progresses toward the ultimate goal of knowing God directly. For Evagrius, this process depends on the body in that our five physical senses provide their spiritual counterparts, the five noetic senses, with metaphors on how to capture realities that are otherwise inaccessible. The very term 'spiritual senses' is a clue that the contemplation of God cannot be conducted without a deep appreciation for physical sensory experience and the vital information it provides.⁵⁴⁷ Noetic sight and hearing are the means of detecting the inner rationality and purpose of created things in the scheme of God's providence and judgment. They deliver insight to the *nous* in much the same way in which physical sight and hearing provide a deeper understanding of our immediate, material surrounding.⁵⁴⁸ Noetic smell and taste, in turn, allow for the detection and savoring of truth, while touch enables the intellect to grasp divine truths. The body teaches religious aspirants how to apply principles derived from the material order to the spiritual realm. By paying close attention to bodily sensations, humans are capable of heightening their awareness of noetic sensations. Bodily perceptions allow the intellect to gain a deeper understanding of its inner mechanisms, its strengths, and its weaknesses:

Just as the soul acting through the body perceives the members which are sick, so too the mind in acting with its proper activity recognizes its own powers and through that which hinders it discovers the commandment capable of healing it.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁶ McGuckin (2001), pp. 39-40; Plested (2004), p. 66.

⁵⁴⁷ Ashbrook Harvey (2006), pp. 171-172.

⁵⁴⁸ Driscoll (2005), p. 41.

⁵⁴⁹ Evagrius, *Prak* 82, in Sinkewicz (2003), p. 111.

Indications of Evagrius's positive stance toward human embodiment do not end here. He insists that the creation of the cosmos is an act of divine compassion by means of which each fallen rational being, each *logikos*, is provided with an environment and a body that corresponds to its degree of self-willed separation from God. All ages, worlds, and bodies exist for the sole purpose of facilitating the return of the *logikos* to God.⁵⁵⁰ Together with an appropriate body, all rational beings are endowed with two 'helpers,' *thumos* (incensive power) and *epithumia* (desire), who reign over the lower parts of the soul. While *thumos* and *epithumia* will overwhelm the soul as passions if they are misused or present in excess, in an ideal state of interior calm and harmony, the former will drive away evil thoughts while the latter will cause the soul to desire virtue and knowledge.⁵⁵¹ To this extent, they are therapeutic remedies which, when employed according to nature, assist the *nous* in its mystical ascent. For Evagrius, it is therefore never a matter of quenching the lower aspect of the soul. The goal of *praktike* is to harness the two helpers and to reintroduce a state of inner equilibrium. It is not to uproot these God-given forces.

Despite appearances, then, Evagrius's conception of the body, is truthful to holistic biblical anthropology and embraces the unity of *nous*, soul, and body. The former is directly linked to the rational part of the soul. The body, in turn, is linked to the irascible and desiring parts of the soul. If passions, delusions, and vice hold sway over these elements of the soul, this link will affect the body adversely. However, if *thumos* and *epithumia* take on the part for which they were intended and serve as helpers, the soul and the body, no less than the mind, are transformed and granted a place in the Kingdom

⁵⁵⁰ Dysinger (2005), pp. 32-33.

⁵⁵¹ Dysinger (2005), pp. 30-31; Plested (2004), p. 66.

of Heaven. In the eschaton, “the names and numbers of ‘body’, ‘soul’, and ‘mind’ will pass away since they will be raised to the order of the mind.”⁵⁵² At this point, all three aspects of human nature will be joined to the nature of their Creator and “by his grace become one with him in all things without end.”⁵⁵³

The above discussions of the Evagrian notion of the heart, of charity, of communal existence, and of the body repeatedly call to mind the teachings of Macarius, Evagrius’s close contemporary. This matter is worth pondering, especially if we bear in mind that they are the two theologians most often singled out to establish the difference between the Hellenic and the Syrian strands of Christianity’s mystical tradition. While the teaching of both men may initially appear markedly different, the above pages have hopefully shown that Evagrius, no less than Macarius, was intimately acquainted with the biblical tradition of the heart and looked to the heart as the seat of a person’s true self and as the locus of the divine-human encounter. Like Macarius, Evagrius insisted on the need for purity of heart. While the Egyptian theologian resorted primarily to Greek terminology and to the notion of *apatheia* to describe this state, he was as committed as the Syrian ascetic to the idea that the pure, enlarged heart serves as the doorway to knowledge of God.

But similarities between both ascetical doctrines go beyond their mutual reliance on biblical anthropological teaching. Both men were members of an ascetical community and derived their teaching from personal experience. Despite the fact that Evagrius could be abstract in his outlook and frequently envisioned the quest for divine knowledge in

⁵⁵² Evagrius, *EM* 22, in Casiday (2006), p. 68.

⁵⁵³ Evagrius, *EM* 63, in Casiday (2006), p. 76.

terms of the stripping of the intellect to its pure, original state, he firmly rooted his ascetical doctrine in the material order and in the lived experience of Christian existence. For him, the body was a divine creation and inherently good. Like Macarius, he argued that untoward behavior has its source not in the body itself but rather in evil thoughts that ignite uncontrollable passions.

Like Macarius, Evagrius viewed the mystical quest as inherently relational. He never conceived of its pinnacle and the acquisition of divine knowledge in terms of a solitary, intellectual endeavor. For him, knowledge of God and neighborly love were inseparably linked. Only a virtuous, charitable heart was able to discern the Lord's teachings. Only if a person was gentle and committed to the imitation of Christ could the innermost self be transformed into a place of divine theophany and indwelling. While deeply committed to the reconceptualization of the biblical temple motif, Evagrius insisted that the inner altar of the heart, like the external altar, can be approached only by Christians who have been reconciled to their neighbors. The idea that mystical seekers divorce themselves from the world was foreign to his teaching. The idea would be foreign to the teaching of all subsequent theologians who looked to Evagrius as their source of inspiration.

Evagrius's œuvre is a source of inspiration in many respects—today no less than in past centuries. His striking insights into the workings of the human psyche have lost little of their relevance and provide contemporary Christians who long for greater intimacy with God with valuable teachings on how to cultivate divine-human relations. His teaching on the conquest of vice, the attainment of dispassion, and the ability to look beyond the surface of reality to detect its deep, underlying nature resonates strongly with meditational practices adopted by modern individuals in the hope of quieting the mind

and of transcending emotional disarray to arrive at a state of compassionate detachment which allows them to recognize the fundamental, unifying pattern of human existence. Evagrius's emphasis on the conquest of inflammatory thoughts by means of self-examination, self-awareness, and discernment serves as a constant reminder that mindfulness is essential if humans wish to overcome fragmentation and transform their deepest self into God's temple.

The Evagrian understanding of inner prayer as dependent on embodied, communal existence also allows contemporary Christians to reevaluate their understanding of what it means to be a mystic in the early Christian sense of the word. It provides them with the opportunity of seeing more clearly that spiritual advancement calls neither for the negation of human relations nor for the negation of embodied existence. Evagrius's mystical doctrine allows them to observe just how vital the ability to meet the challenges of material, relational existence is to the direct encounter with God. In this respect, the Evagrian œuvre provides today's Christians with a powerful incentive to revise their understanding of the mystical life and to recognize that such an existence is always rooted in the very tangible, very interactive here and now.

CHAPTER 5

The Early Byzantine Synthesis

Dionysius the Areopagite

With Dionysius the Areopagite we encounter a major theologian and synthesizer of the early Christian tradition. Dionysius was greatly influenced by Neoplatonic teaching yet articulated a doctrine that was deeply Christian in its outlook.⁵⁵⁴ He was at home in the Syrian ascetical milieu and at the same time intimately acquainted with Origen's legacy. His corpus, which numbers four relatively short treatises, *The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *Mystical Theology*, as well as some letters,⁵⁵⁵ bears witness to his ability to draw on diverse teachings without undermining the coherence and unity of his system. Philosophical elucidation goes hand in hand with a deep awareness of the need to live the Christian message and to experience Divinity on a very personal level.⁵⁵⁶ His teaching on God's immanence in creation is gracefully joined to the belief in God's utter transcendence. Divine radiance and glory do not render void the reality of divine darkness.

Little can be said about the author of the Dionysian corpus, an unknown Syrian priest ascetic who chose to circulate his writings under the pseudonym of Dionysius the

⁵⁵⁴ Louth (1989), p. 21.

⁵⁵⁵ For a commentary on each of these texts see Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵⁵⁶ Louth (1989), p. 25.

Areopagite, a companion and disciple of St. Paul in Athens.⁵⁵⁷ It is commonly accepted that the writings, which first gained attention when used by Cyrilline theologians rejecting the Chalcedonian decree to argue their case in 532,⁵⁵⁸ belong to the end of the fifth or the beginning of the sixth century. They were edited in the middle of the sixth century by John of Scythopolis from which point onward they exerted a profound influence on subsequent theologians. In the Christian East, they were highly esteemed by ascetical writers, such as Maximus the Confessor and Andrew of Crete. In the West, the *Corpus Areopagiticum* was embraced, among others, by Pope Gregory the Great, John Scotus Eriugena, Bonaventure, and Albert the Great. It provided a powerful contribution to the later medieval mystical revival and left a permanent mark on teachings, such as those presented in the *Cloud of Unknowing* and in the writings of the Rhineland mystics.⁵⁵⁹

Most noticeable about the author of this body of work is his familiarity and enthusiasm for a strand of Neoplatonism closely associated with the fifth century Academy in Athens, run for much of the century by its foremost representative Proclus (410-85). The similarities between Dionysian and Procline teachings are striking indeed and call for a brief introductory discussion.

As we have seen repeatedly, Dionysius was by no means the first early Christian theologian to draw on Greek philosophical concepts. Platonic currents were prominent in the works of Origen as well as Evagrius and even the writings of the Syrian ascetic Macarius harbor an intellectual-immaterial element that owes much to Plato. The tradition

⁵⁵⁷ McGuckin (2004b), v.s. "Dionysius the Areopagite," p. 104.

⁵⁵⁸ Louth (1989), p. 75.

⁵⁵⁹ For an introductory discussion of Dionysius's influence on the medieval West see Jean Leclercq, "Influence and noninfluence of Dionysius in the Western Middle Ages," in Luibheid (1987), pp. 25-32.

of 'Christian Platonism' is long indeed and can be traced from late ancient Alexandria, through the Asia Minor of the Cappadocians, through Dionysius, Maximus, and John Damascene on into the Byzantine period.⁵⁶⁰

A first teaching that is of Neoplatonic inspiration is the Dionysian circular conception of procession, return, and rest which originates with Proclus's prominent motif of triadic development. Paying close attention to the central philosophical problem of the relationship between the One and the many, Proclus pointed to the former, the First Cause, as the source whence the multiplicity of beings proceed "as branches from a root."⁵⁶¹ The procession of beings from the One, he resumed, numbers three moments of development, (i) remaining in the original principle, (ii) proceeding out of the principle, and (iii) turning-back towards the principle. In every being that proceeds forth from the hypostasis above, Proclus discerned a natural tendency to turn back toward the immediate source of emanation.⁵⁶²

Dionysius made much of the idea of a development in three movements and of the basic Neoplatonic premise that the proceeding forth and turning back to the One is facilitated by a scale of being in which lower hypostases depend on the mediating activity of higher hypostases. However, as a Christian and a firm believer that God alone is the source of being, he insisted that being itself cannot derive from a stream of emanated hypostases, each deriving from the hypostasis above. For Dionysius, being was created directly by God and the sense of dependence on higher hypostases was of significance only with regard to the principle of illumination. Like being, light and knowledge derive

⁵⁶⁰ Alexander Golitzin, "Dionysius Areopagite: A Christian Mysticism?" *Pro Ecclesia* 12.2 (Spring 2003): 191.

⁵⁶¹ Copleston (1993), p. 479.

⁵⁶² Copleston (1993), p. 479.

from the One. Unlike being, they are not bestowed by God alone but are communicated by a downward movement of procession. As each hypostasis is illuminated by preceding hypostases, it transmits its own radiance to beings lower in the hierarchy.⁵⁶³

Proclus suggested that the process of turning back toward the One is greatly enhanced by the application of theurgy.⁵⁶⁴ While Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, had argued that the only activity by means of which humans can return from multiplicity to unity is contemplation, his successor, Proclus, believed that theurgical power rather than human wisdom is more likely to facilitate such a process.⁵⁶⁵ Dionysius embraced this Neoplatonic doctrine yet recontextualized Proclus's concept of *theourgia* by placing it within a Christian context. For him, the term theurgy referred to the sacraments, i.e. to sensible symbols which facilitate the gathering-together of the many to the One by serving as vehicles of grace. Dionysius did not believe in an inherent occult sympathy between material elements and the spiritual realm. Unlike the theurgical Neoplatonists, he denied that physical objects *per se* invite divine-human communication.⁵⁶⁶ Theurgy, as he envisioned it, was not concerned with works addressed by humans to the gods. Christian theurgy referred to God's salvific acts and specifically to the incarnation, the quintessential act of salvation.⁵⁶⁷ It implied the reenactment and celebration of these acts during the liturgy and the manifestation of their transformative effect among members of

⁵⁶³ Louth (1989), p. 85.

⁵⁶⁴ Proclus is said to have distinguished between various types of theurgy. The lower type seems to have involved the invocation of gods by means of plants, stones, and animals which were supposed to be sympathetic to the gods invoked. A higher form of theurgy would have been of a more spiritual nature and involved hymns and prayers. For a discussion of Procline theurgy, see Anne Sheppard, "Proclus 'Attitude to Theurgy,'" *Classical Quarterly* 32 (1982): 211-224.

⁵⁶⁵ Golitzin (2003), p. 171; Louth (1981), p. 162; Paul Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), p. 106. Proclus expresses this notion in his *Platonic Theology* I.25, ed. H. D. Saffrey and L. G. Westerink (Paris: Vrin, 1968), p. 113.

⁵⁶⁶ Louth (1981) p. 163-164.

⁵⁶⁷ Rorem (1984), pp. 14-15.

the congregation. Christian theurgy allowed humans to reverse the movement from unity to fragmentation and to be reassembled around the throne of God. Dionysius elaborated on his theurgical teaching by insisting that the process of returning to unity with the One depended on the strict enforcement of a triadic hierarchical order, a concept he once again borrowed from Proclus.

The division of the cosmos into triads suffuses Procline teaching. Taking as his starting point Plotinus's three hypostases, the One, Intelligence, and Soul, Proclus suggested that from each hypostasis replicas issue: from the One, *henads* or gods, from Intelligence, intelligences, that is, daemons or angels, and from Soul, souls.⁵⁶⁸ Dionysius reworked these three levels of reality by proposing three triadic arrangements, consisting of the Thearchy, the celestial hierarchy, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The Thearchy is the Trinity. The second hierarchical order, the celestial hierarchy, numbers among the highest of its three orders the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones. The second rank of the heavenly arrangement consists of the dominions, powers, and authorities, while the third rank comprises the principalities, archangels, and angels. Dionysius discussed his understanding of this hierarchical order in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, a work in which he also presented a complex method for the interpretation of religious symbols, specifically for the interpretation of biblical symbols, angelic names, and divine names.⁵⁶⁹

In his description of the hierarchy to which we belong, the earthly or ecclesiastical hierarchy, Dionysius once again distinguished three levels of gradation, the highest level featuring the sacraments, the intermediate level featuring the ministers, and the last level numbering those to whom the latter minister. Analogous to the ranks of the celestial

⁵⁶⁸ Louth (1981), p. 163.

⁵⁶⁹ Rorem (1993), p. 49.

hierarchy, he subdivided each level into a further triad, conceiving of the three sacraments in terms of baptism, the Eucharist, and the sacrament of oil. The three orders of clergy comprise the hierarchs, the priests, and the deacons while the last level of the ecclesiastical hierarchy features the monks, the communicants or 'sacred people,' and those who have yet to be initiated or who have spoilt their initiation, the catechumens and the penitents. Dionysius elucidated this triadic arrangement in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, a work which, given its content, provided him with the opportunity of presenting a systematic interpretation of Christianity's main rites as well as a discussion of the clergy.

Dionysius's reliance on Proclus's triadic systematization does not end here. Drawing on the triad of purification, illumination, and perfection, a triad which, as we have seen in our discussions of Origen and Evagrius, has antecedents in the Christian tradition, Dionysius discerned a fundamental rhythm which allows God to draw the whole of the created order back into divine union. By suggesting that, in every hierarchy, the highest rank perfects or is being perfected, the middle rank illuminates or is being illuminated, and the lowest order purifies or is being purified,⁵⁷⁰ he presented a carefully thought out chain of interdependent beings that facilitates the progressive assimilation to God. Commenting on his understanding of the three ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Dionysius proposed that the highest order, the order of the rites, is inherently perfecting in nature. The clergy, the middle rank, fulfills the function of illumination. It enlightens beings of the lowest rank, the laity, who require purification, and readies them for the reception of the mysteries.⁵⁷¹ The same principle holds true for each individual triad.

⁵⁷⁰ Louth (1989), pp. 40-41.

⁵⁷¹ Louth (1981), p. 171.

Taking a look at the lowest human triad, we find that the monks are in the process of being perfected. The 'sacred people' are being illuminated while the lowest order, which consists of individuals awaiting their initiation, stand in need of purification and are being purified.

If the principle of subdivision applies to the lowest triad of the human hierarchy, it is applicable also to the highest triad of the celestial hierarchy: the seraphim, the 'carriers of warmth,' who have the ability to stamp their own image on subordinates and to arouse in them an equal measure of warmth, represent perfection.⁵⁷² The cherubim, who have the power to know and to see God and who bestow on their inferiors the gift of wisdom, exemplify the spiritual principle of illumination. The thrones, in turn, transcend every earthly defect and, being wholly pure, represent purification. Dionysius greatly believed in the value of creation's hierarchical arrangement and placed this concept at the very center of his teaching. This being the case, he nevertheless insisted that the threefold progression of purification, illumination, and perfection cannot be accomplished without divine intervention. A person's assimilation to God and deification depend wholly on God's gracious movement toward the created order.

Dionysius's understanding that the intellect cannot ascend into the presence of God of its own accord but depends on divine intervention is worth pondering. If we do so, we will soon realize that the theologian's enthusiasm for Neoplatonic thought is balanced by his abiding belief in the Christian message of God's gracious and loving outreach to humankind. We come to realize that Dionysius establishes a careful balance between

⁵⁷² Dionysius, *CH* 7.1, in Luibheid (1987), pp. 161-162.

philosophical inquiry into the nature of God and the importance of experiencing the divine presence on an emotive, visceral level.

The above discussion of Neoplatonic teachings adopted by Dionysius, while brief, has allowed us to see that his debt to philosophy and this particular school of thought was pronounced. The Procline doctrine of procession and return was ever on his mind. So, too, was the closely related notion of mediation and its underlying premise that 'like is known by like,' an established Greek philosophical maxim. Although Dionysius never quoted from Plato or his successors, he frequently alluded to them in his works.⁵⁷³ Dionysius was not adverse to the rational inquiry into the nature of the divine realm and the systematization of acquired insight. The theological tradition, he proposed, has a dual aspect and draws on philosophy and the method of demonstration to come to a better understanding of Divinity. It "uses persuasion and imposes the truthfulness of what is asserted."⁵⁷⁴

This having been said, it is important to bear in mind that Dionysius aligned himself with a school of Platonic thought that, unlike earlier exponents, echoed his own belief by questioning the soul's inherent ability to ascend to the One. As suggested above, Proclus had little faith in contemplation as a means of bolstering the inherent weakness of the soul sufficiently to allow for participation in the divine realm. He looked to theurgy as a far more powerful instrument of mystical ascent. Dionysius adopted this Procline feature, yet placed it within the context of God's deep love for creation. He suggested that Christian theurgical rites bear witness to this love by manifesting God's saving acts. They point to love as the all-pervasive force behind the soul's return to God. Dionysius never

⁵⁷³ Louth (1989), p. 21. As pointed out by Louth, in *DN* 2.7 on love of the beautiful, Dionysius reproduces part of Diotima's speech to Socrates from the *Symposium*.

⁵⁷⁴ Dionysius, *Ep* 9.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 283.

wavered in his deep conviction that Divinity actively searches for humankind and seeks to win back all who have lost their sense of divine origin.⁵⁷⁵ God's love suffuses the universe and draws all beings into oneness. Citing his spiritual father Hierotheus, Dionysius comments on the unifying power of divine love in the following words:

From the same writer and work [*Hymns of Love*]: Come, let us gather all these once more together into a unity and let us say that there is a simple self-moving power directing all things to mingle as one, that it starts out from the Good, reaches down to the lowliest creation, returns then in due order through all the stages back to the Good, and thus turns from itself and through itself and upon itself and toward itself in an everlasting circle.⁵⁷⁶

Dionysius reiterates the idea that God's love is the driving force behind everything that pertains to the created order in the following words:

And, in truth, it must be said too that the very cause of the universe in the beautiful, good superabundance of his benign yearning for all is also carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything. He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself.⁵⁷⁷

If Dionysius is emphatic that our being is caused by the outreach of God's boundless love, he is equally emphatic that humans cannot explain this love or think about it. Divine love has to be experienced; it has to be suffered. Once again inspired by Hierotheus, Dionysius draws on his mentor's account of union with God to elucidate this aspect of his mystical teaching. While education and biblical studies have a distinct place in the life of the Christian, the encounter with God calls for surrender to divine love:

I have said enough about this elsewhere and my famous teacher has marvelously praised in his *Elements of Theology* whatever he learned directly from the sacred writers, whatever his own perspicacious and laborious research of the scriptures uncovered for him, or whatever was made known to him through more mysterious inspiration, not only learning but also experiencing the divine things. For he had a "sympathy" with such

⁵⁷⁵ Louth (1989), p. 108.

⁵⁷⁶ Dionysius, *DN* 4.17, in Luibheid (1987), p. 84.

⁵⁷⁷ Dionysius, *DN* 4.13, in Luibheid (1987), p. 82.

matters, if I may express it this way, and he was perfected in a mysterious union with them and in a faith in them which was independent of any education.⁵⁷⁸

Union with God is attained by a passive process which presupposes, in Dionysius's words, a certain 'sympathy' with divine things and the willingness to suffer their impact. While humans can acquire knowledge of God in part through intellectual inquiry and the study of Scripture, the process of drawing close to Divinity depends, ultimately, on an untaught, visceral experience. At the final stage of the return to the One, mystical seekers deliver themselves into the arms of God. Like Hierotheus, who "was so caught up, so taken out of himself, experiencing communion with the things praised, that everyone who heard him, everyone who saw him, everyone who knew him . . . considered him to be inspired, to be speaking with divine praises,"⁵⁷⁹ humans become vessels of God's presence and love; they experience "a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and the Good."⁵⁸⁰ Inadvertently, they bear witness to the second aspect of the theological tradition, the ineffable aspect, which "puts souls firmly in the presence of God"⁵⁸¹ and which, unlike rational inquiry, resorts to symbolism to convey, in some small measure, the incomprehensible nature of Divinity.

To the extent to which Dionysius emphasizes the experiential, affective nature of the encounter with God, he seems particularly at home in the Syrian ascetical tradition, and we will have occasion to consider his place within this tradition as we examine the liturgical conception of his mystical doctrine. For now, however, let us recall that Dionysius, while heir to the teachings of Aphrahat, Ephrem, the author of the *Liber*

⁵⁷⁸ Dionysius, *DN* 2.9, in Luibheid (1987), p. 65.

⁵⁷⁹ Dionysius, *DN* 3.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 70.

⁵⁸⁰ Dionysius, *DN* 4.12, in Luibheid (1987), p. 81.

⁵⁸¹ Dionysius, *Ep* 9.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 283.

Gradium, and Macarius, was also intimately acquainted with the works of Origen and Evagrius, two theologians who, in their own right, were esteemed for their teaching on the experiential, deeply felt encounter with God. Dionysius's emphasis on the struggle against the passions, on the acquisition of the virtues, above all of mercy and love, and on the attainment of *apatheia* as preconditions for knowledge of God is strongly reminiscent of Evagrius's ascetical doctrine. Likewise reminiscent of his predecessor's teaching is Dionysius's call for singleness of life and for undistracted, imageless prayer.

Given these similarities, it is worth our time to explore Dionysius's conception of the ascetical life and its debt to Evagrian teaching in greater detail. How does Dionysius envision the threefold movement toward God? In which instances is he most influenced by his fourth century predecessor? What is his understanding of the deifying union with God, a union which, as we have already seen, is characterized by surrender to God's intoxicating love?

For Dionysius, the ascetical life and the dynamic movement toward God begins with people's ability to become aware of their sinful state of existence and with the fervent wish to overcome vice.⁵⁸² A catechumen who aspires to divine unity must have "duly examined with unbiased gaze what he himself is"⁵⁸³ and avoid the dark pits of ignorance. Dionysius presents his understanding of the purifying process for the most part in his discussion of the laity and its lowest order in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. In it, he draws attention to the dangers of succumbing to the influence of demonic forces. These forces, he cautions his audience, lure catechumens away from the truly real, from immortal possessions, and from everlasting bliss and enslave them to pleasures which die

⁵⁸² Walther Völker, *Kontemplation and Ekstase bei Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1958), p. 54.

⁵⁸³ Dionysius, *EH* 2.3.4, in Luibheid (1987), p. 206.

and corrupt, to the instability of things, and to the appearance of happiness.⁵⁸⁴ Dionysius notes repeatedly that the ascetical life is characterized by the ceaseless attempt to oppose whatever may sunder communion with the One.⁵⁸⁵ Like Evagrius, he believes that the sacred combat against God's adversaries is a lifelong battle that ends only at death.⁵⁸⁶

In his eighth letter, in which Dionysius further expounds on the ascetical struggle, he argues that a life dominated by God's adversaries annihilates our inner, God-given order. This inherent order is maintained by the dominion of reason over inferior and potentially destructive impulses, primarily anger and desire:

Therefore, how could we avoid being ashamed as we witness reason harmed by anger and desire, when we see it driven from the authority given to it by God so that in an unholy and unjust manner trouble, discord, and disorder are stirred up in us?⁵⁸⁷

According to Dionysius's ascetical teaching, the battle against the forces of evil depends on the cultivation of virtue, above all on the cultivation of meekness, mercy, and love. Reminiscent of Evagrius's discussion on the same matter, Dionysius suggests that Moses earned a sight of God because of his great meekness.⁵⁸⁸ He elaborates on this aspect of his teaching by establishing that David was loved by God because he was good, even to his enemies. Job was justified because he remained aloof from all wrongdoing, while Joseph found favor with God for not taking revenge on the brothers who betrayed him.⁵⁸⁹ Dionysius's teaching on the virtuous life culminates with his call to look beyond even the gentleness of sacred people and the generosity of the angels toward Christ himself whose many deeds of love set the ultimate standard by which Christians are to measure themselves. Christ revealed to humankind how to be kind to the ungrateful and

⁵⁸⁴ Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.7, in Luibheid (1987), p. 216.

⁵⁸⁵ Dionysius, *EH* 2.3.5, in Luibheid (1987), p. 206.

⁵⁸⁶ Dionysius, *EH* 7.3.8, in Luibheid (1987), p. 257.

⁵⁸⁷ Dionysius, *Ep* 8.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 275.

⁵⁸⁸ Dionysius, *Ep* 8.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 269.

⁵⁸⁹ Dionysius, *Ep* 8.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 270.

how to make the sun rise on the evil and on the good.⁵⁹⁰ It is the responsibility of every individual who wishes to attain union with God to imitate Christ's behavior.

Dionysius is not as detailed and systematic in his description of the ascetical life as Evagrius is.⁵⁹¹ Nevertheless, he, too, conveys a strong sense of the necessity to combat evil, to acquire virtue, and to attain a state of being in which the Christian is no longer assailed by the illusions and terrors of the adversary. Like Evagrius, Dionysius refers to this state as the state of *apatheia*:

He will rebuff them [the illusions or the terrors of the adversary] and chase them away if they come on the scene. He will be more active than passive. Having adopted impassibility and endurance as the guiding norm of his state he will be seen, like a doctor, helping others who are possessed by these things.⁵⁹²

For Dionysius, as for Evagrius, the successful redirection and transformation of the passions enable Christians to lead an existence "which excludes all distraction and enables them to achieve a singular mode of life conforming to God and open to the perfection of God's love."⁵⁹³ *Apatheia* denotes "the renunciation of all activities and of all phantasies which could lead to a distracted living."⁵⁹⁴ Dionysius discusses the notion of impassibility primarily within the context of his elucidation of the monastic order, the highest rank of the laity, whose members have been purified and illuminated to such a degree as to lead a life wholly focused on God.⁵⁹⁵ The singleness of their concentration and existence sets an example for all Christians to emulate.

Dionysius's understanding that *apatheia* introduces ascetics to a state of undistracted concentration on God invites comparison to Evagrius's notion of pure

⁵⁹⁰ Dionysius, *Ep* 8.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 271. For the importance of *Imitatio Christi* in the Dionysian corpus see Völker (1958), esp. pp. 54-59.

⁵⁹¹ Völker (1958), pp. 59.

⁵⁹² Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.7, in Luibheid (1987), p. 216.

⁵⁹³ Dionysius, *EH* 6.1.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 244.

⁵⁹⁴ Dionysius, *EH* 6.3.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 247.

⁵⁹⁵ Dionysius, *EH* 6.1.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 245.

prayer, an inner state in which the mind has been stripped of all thoughts, images, and concepts and is so pure as to contemplate God directly. Although Dionysius has far less to say on the subject of prayer than Evagrius, he nevertheless impresses on his audience the need for “prayers that are holy”⁵⁹⁶ and that are offered “with untroubled mind.”⁵⁹⁷ By offering such prayers, Christians are “uplifted in a sacred fashion toward the ultimate perfection of the Deity.”⁵⁹⁸ Like Evagrius, Dionysius thus believes that the purification and stilling of the mind and its deep absorption in divine things is the quintessential means of encountering God. While Dionysius does not refer explicitly to the biblical notion of the pure heart or to the concept of the heart as the site of personal unity and spiritual worship, his understanding that only holy, or pure, prayer will raise humans into the presence of God resonates strongly with teachings on inner prayer discussed in previous chapters. Only if the mind, or the heart, has been sufficiently calmed and a person’s inherent inner order reestablished, can Christians hope to be lifted toward the “kindly Rays of God.”⁵⁹⁹

If the Evagrian and Dionysian notions of prayer are similar in many respects, so are their respective understandings of the encounter with God. As we have just seen, both theologians agree that God lies beyond concepts that imprint the mind. They agree that the perception of God takes place in a realm that escapes human comprehension. Evagrius, for his part, writes that “the mind could not see the place of God in itself, unless it had become loftier than all [concepts] from things.”⁶⁰⁰ Dionysius focuses even more on the inexpressible nature of communion with God and describes the experience as a deeply

⁵⁹⁶ Dionysius, *DN* 3.1.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 68.

⁵⁹⁷ Dionysius, *DN* 3.1.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 68.

⁵⁹⁸ Dionysius, *DN* 2.3.5, in Luibheid (1987), p. 207.

⁵⁹⁹ Dionysius, *DN* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 68.

⁶⁰⁰ Evagrius, *Thoughts* 40, in Casiday (2006), p. 114.

mysterious event in which the intellect is taken out of itself to encounter God in a union of unknowing.⁶⁰¹ According to Dionysius, the intellect relinquishes all control and any hold over that which is familiar and surrenders to the loving outreach of Deity. It enters a passive state in which it belongs no longer to itself but to God, the Beloved.⁶⁰² It is “lifted upward to that brilliance above, to the dazzling light of those beams”⁶⁰³ and ‘suffers’ divine unity.

Like Evagrius, who conceives of pure prayer as a state in which the mind beholds the light of the Trinity,⁶⁰⁴ Dionysius pays much attention to the radiant nature of Divinity. Unlike Evagrius, however, he proposes that heavenly light is so bright as to blind the eye of the mind. Christians who draw close to God are enfolded by the dark rays of divine glory and enter into darkness.⁶⁰⁵

Trinity!! Higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness! Guide of Christians in the wisdom of heaven! Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God’s Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence. Amid the deepest shadow they pour overwhelming light on what is most manifest. Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen they completely fill our sightless minds with treasures beyond all beauty.⁶⁰⁶

In his exposition of the motif of divine darkness, Dionysius pays careful attention to the biblical account of Moses as he ascends Mount Sinai. Indeed, Moses’s ascent of the mountain and entrance into ever deeper darkness is the primary means by which Dionysius explicates his doctrine of the way of negation, or apophaticism. It is a concept for which he is much renowned, and, given its lasting impact on the Christian mystical

⁶⁰¹ Dionysius, *DN* 3.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 70.

⁶⁰² Dionysius, *DN* 4.13, in Luibheid (1987), p. 82.

⁶⁰³ Dionysius, *DN* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 68.

⁶⁰⁴ Evagrius, *Thoughts* 39, 42, in Casiday (2006), pp. 114, 116.

⁶⁰⁵ Louth (1989), p. 107.

⁶⁰⁶ Dionysius, *MT* 1.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 135.

tradition, it is of interest to cite the theologian's explication of this teaching at some length:

It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he [Moses] pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.⁶⁰⁷

We can learn much from the above passage. Its concluding lines confirm our observation that Dionysius conceives of union with God in terms of an ecstatic experience. The soul is driven out of itself by divine love and becomes one with the Unknowable. Guided to the pinnacle of the mystical journey by God's yearning for the created order and having laid aside all human knowledge and understanding, the soul delivers itself into the arms of the Beloved.

From the above citation, we can also gain insight into Dionysius's views on an earlier phase of the return to God, a phase during which Moses contemplates Deity's dwelling-place and the many things through which its "unimaginable presence is shown." This phase is characterized by cataphatic theology or the way of affirmation. Unlike apopathic theology, which is concerned with a state in which human speech and thought fail to describe the divine encounter,⁶⁰⁸ cataphatic theology invests in affirmative

⁶⁰⁷ Dionysius, *MT* 1.3, in Luijckheid (1987), pp. 136-7.

⁶⁰⁸ Louth (1981), p. 165.

declarative statements about God. These statements can be made because God is present to us through all created things to which the mind can rise. By means of cataphatic theology, it is possible to describe the beauty and glory of Deity as they manifest themselves throughout the cosmos. While the way of negation, by virtue of denying qualities of God, presents the truest possible way of referring to the Invisible, Infinite, and Ineffable and is more fundamental than the way of affirmation, the latter approach raises our awareness to the inherent goodness and splendor of the created order. By doing so, it initiates the movement back into the presence of God. It marks the first step away from multiplicity to unity.

The above citation invites one further observation. Dionysius's account of Moses's ascent of Mount Sinai is full of liturgical echoes.⁶⁰⁹ After his initial purification, the patriarch separates himself from the crowd and climbs the mountain accompanied by chosen priests in much the same way in which the hierarch is purified and then approaches the altar with his priests. Just as the liturgy progresses from the first part devoted to the readings of Scripture to the hidden consecration in the sanctuary, Moses passes from "what sees and is seen" into the darkness of the hidden God. These liturgical echoes are of great importance to a better understanding of Dionysius's mystical doctrine, and enable us to consider the role he attributes to the church and its liturgy in the life of the mystical seeker. Liturgical echoes suggest that the church, or the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and its sacraments are the means by which Christians ascend the holy mountain and enter into the darkness that reveals to them the presence of God. They allow us to see that Dionysius cannot conceive of divine unity apart from the hierarchical arrangement of the body of Christ.

⁶⁰⁹ Louth (1989), p. 101.

Before we consider Dionysius's conception of the church and its rites in greater detail, a number of preliminary comments on his understanding of hierarchy are in order. For Dionysius, the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies reveal the glory and love of Divinity. They are instruments of theophany. As active mediators of divine light, love, and knowledge, they call back to unity all beings who have been sundered from God. Dionysius articulates his conception of hierarchy in the following words:

In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine. . . . It reaches out to grant every being, according to merit, a share of light and then through a divine sacrament, in harmony and in peace, it bestows on each of those being perfected its own form.⁶¹⁰

Far from curtailing a person's possibility of establishing direct communion with God, the concept of hierarchy, as envisioned by Dionysius, provides humans with the unique opportunity of participating directly in the light and likeness of God. For the sixth century theologian, the hierarchical arrangement of the created order does not imply exclusion and division, a viewpoint modern readers are likely to adopt. On the contrary, for Dionysius, the concept of hierarchy suggests inclusion and unity.⁶¹¹ By means of the earthly and heavenly hierarchies, divine love and glory are mediated to the created order. As these divine attributes radiate out from the Thearchy and are received successively by each of the descending orders of hypostases, they reshape the fabric of created beings. They set in motion a process of transformation that culminates in a deifying union with God. According to Dionysius, the entire hierarchical arrangement serves the purpose of deification:

⁶¹⁰ Dionysius, *CH* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), pp. 153-154.

⁶¹¹ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 31.

The goal of hierarchy, then, is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him. A hierarchy has God as its leader of all understanding and action. It is forever looking directly at the comeliness of God. A hierarchy bears in itself the mark of God. Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself.⁶¹²

Hierarchy is an essential means of overcoming human fragmentation and of assimilating to Divinity. Ultimately, it allows for full conformity to God and a climactic mystical union. As seen earlier, this process is made possible through the administration of a threefold movement that purifies, illuminates, and perfects and that is rooted in the church. For Dionysius, our assimilation to God depends at all times on the church. Its liturgy, which reveals God's saving deeds, is the quintessential means of entering into the presence of Divinity:

For it is impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness. The beautiful odors which strike the senses are representations of a conceptual diffusion. Material lights are images of the outpouring of an immaterial gift of light. The thoroughness of sacred discipleship indicates the immense contemplative capacity of the mind. Order and rank here below are a sign of the harmonious ordering toward the divine realm. The reception of the most divine Eucharist is a symbol of participation in Jesus.⁶¹³

If humans wish to attain union with God, they are in need of material aid. As we suggested above, Dionysius proposes that this aid is provided by theurgical means, that is, by the liturgy. Its candles, incense, scriptural readings, orders of clergy, and sacraments collectively symbolize the incarnation. The liturgy manifests to the congregation the presence of God.⁶¹⁴ Through material objects, God's saving deeds are invoked and Christians initiated into the harmonious ordering of the divine realm. They receive God's

⁶¹² Dionysius, *CH* 3.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 154.

⁶¹³ Dionysius, *CH* 1.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 146.

⁶¹⁴ Golitzin (2003), p. 173.

deifying gift, “which makes [us] good and divine.”⁶¹⁵ To the extent to which the worship of the ecclesiastical hierarchy is a reflection of the angelic liturgy, it allows Christians to participate in the heavenly celebration and to assemble around the throne of God. The church and its liturgy enable humans to draw ever closer to the source of their being.

The idea that the ecclesiastical hierarchy and its liturgy manifest divine grace to Christians and facilitate their union with God is exemplified by Dionysius’s understanding of the Eucharist, to which he refers as the rite of *synaxis*, that is, the rite of communion or gathering. The celebration of the Eucharist draws “our fragmented lives together into a one-like divinization.”⁶¹⁶ It is the high point of every rite and gathers the holy people peacefully around the earthly altar as well as the altar on high. The celebration of the Eucharist assembles members of the congregation around Christ himself, “our most divine altar,”⁶¹⁷ who “grants us the fullness of his own consecration and . . . arranges to offer generously to us, as children of God, whatever is consecrated on him.”⁶¹⁸ Through the Eucharist and the direct contact it elicits with the Son, the presence of Divinity is brought to humans. Through the Eucharist, Christians are drawn into oneness with one another, the angels, and God. Together with the mystical orders of baptism and chrismation, it forms the highest triad of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and radiates deifying light to the worshipping congregation.

If the celebration of the liturgy and of the Eucharist, in particular, draws humans into unity with fellow-beings, with the angels, and with God, it also draws them into inner unity. The structured order of the church at worship is not only a reflection of the

⁶¹⁵ Dionysius, *Ep* 2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 263.

⁶¹⁶ Dionysius, *EH* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 209.

⁶¹⁷ Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.12 in Luibheid (1987), p. 232.

⁶¹⁸ Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.12 in Luibheid (1987), p. 232.

heavenly realm; it also mirrors the inner condition of individual participants. If it is impossible “to be gathered together toward the One and to partake of peaceful union with the One while divided among ourselves,”⁶¹⁹ it is equally impossible to be enlightened and to be united with God while afflicted by inner fragmentation. For Dionysius, the Eucharist therefore forges a union out of external as well as internal division.⁶²⁰ Unless our inherent inner order is reestablished and reason’s dominion over anger and desire asserted, Christians cannot become “both the temple and the companion of the Spirit of the Deity.”⁶²¹

For Dionysius, the liturgy features prominently in our interior lives. On the one hand, it is a transforming force that molds the soul from within.⁶²² It reintroduces intrapsychic order and allows for the divine consecration of our inner faculties.⁶²³ On the other hand, the liturgy is an outward projection of our inner condition. As Dionysius establishes in his eighth letter, the sacred order of the church is upset if the soul’s original alignment is lost. For the hierarchical structure of the church and its liturgy to be maintained, the Christian has to “give due place within himself to reason, anger, and desire.”⁶²⁴ By disturbing the inherent order of the soul and thereby the order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, humans place themselves beyond the reach of the cosmic hierarchical arrangement and the deifying light it mediates. They place themselves beyond the divinely instituted structure that effects their transformation into temples of God.

⁶¹⁹ Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.8, in Luibheid (1987), p. 218.

⁶²⁰ Dionysius, *EH* 3.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 209.

⁶²¹ Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.7, in Luibheid (1987), p. 216.

⁶²² Golitzin (2003), p. 185.

⁶²³ Dionysius, *EH* 4.3.12, in Luibheid (1987), p. 232; Plested (2004), p. 253, n. 114.

⁶²⁴ Dionysius, *Ep* 8.3, in Luibheid (1987), p. 275.

Dionysius's belief that the church at worship and the condition of the soul mirror one another as well as his emphasis on the transformation of Christians into places of divine indwelling reintroduces us to the biblical temple motif and the notion of its interiorization. We reenter the world of fourth century Syrian Christianity and come to realize that its interest in the liturgical conception of the ascetical life was not lost on Dionysius. Like Aphrahat, Ephrem, the author of the *Book of Steps*, and Macarius, their sixth century successor establishes an inherent link between the external liturgy and the internal glorification of God. While Dionysius does not speak explicitly of the heart as an inner altar, we are left in no doubt that, for him, the purification, illumination, and perfection of our deepest selves is the means by which we are transformed into divine temples. Here, Christians enter into very personal, direct relations with God. Like his Syrian forefathers, but also like Origen and Evagrius, Dionysius embraces the spiritualization of the worship experience without suggesting the withdrawal from the communal life of the church. As we have just seen, the church is the all-important means of transporting humans into the presence of Deity. It provides the communal setting which allows for intrapsychic, social, and supernatural reintegration. For Dionysius, the relational nature of the mystical life is beyond dispute. The very concept of hierarchy, the agent of unification *per se*, implies relationality.

Bearing in mind that Dionysius coined the term 'mystical theology' and that his teaching had a lasting impact on subsequent generations of Christian ascetical writers, it is of considerable interest to note his enthusiasm for the communal setting of the Christian life. Certainly, it raises the question if today's common assumption that so-called mystics seek intimacy with God by divorcing themselves from the world and

fellow-beings is really in accordance with Dionysius's teaching. A further, closely related question pertains to Dionysius's stance toward the created order. Does he heed the teaching of earlier theologians and affirm the goodness of creation? Does he embrace our embodied existence? Is this a further instance in which a common assumption, the assumption that ascetics of the early church viewed the body as an inherent obstacle to the quest for God, can be shown to be inaccurate?

We have already witnessed Dionysius's commitment to the relational nature of Christian existence. We have seen that, for him, the very concept of hierarchy implies relationality and that it is the quintessential means by which humans draw closer to one another, to the angels, and to God. We have seen that the Eucharist, the highest order of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, marks the climax of every rite because it allows for the transcendence of division and for the introduction of unity in Christ.⁶²⁵

We can deepen our understanding of the Dionysian notion of hierarchy and its inherently relational component if we consider the role of the hierarch, the celebrant of the mysteries. If we bear in mind that the hierarch, as part of the earthly community that is being saved and mediates salvation,⁶²⁶ facilitates the return to God by mediating to members of the congregation his own experience of God's love and glory, we come to see to how great a degree the quest for God depends on interpersonal relations. We come to see that the celebrant's ability to bequeath to Christians of the lower orders his knowledge of God—a knowledge that, in turn, is bestowed upon him by members of the celestial hierarchy—is a vital means of unifying them with Divinity. In this respect, the role of the hierarch provides us with a prime example of Dionysius's understanding that contact with

⁶²⁵ Dionysius, *EH* 3.3.8, in Luibheid (1987), p. 218.

⁶²⁶ Louth (1989), p. 41.

God is made possible through human exchange and mutual assistance. Christians cannot experience divine oneness apart from the network of relations provided by the church:

Sharing in the divine peace, the higher gathering powers are drawn to themselves, to each other, and to unity and are at one with the source of peace in all the world. The ranks below them are united to themselves, to one another, and to the one perfect Source of Cause of universal peace.⁶²⁷

For Dionysius, the principle of hierarchy is inherently relational because it is never an impersonal principle. This is an important aspect to bear in mind. Members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy are real people and the relationships within the hierarchy are personal relationships.⁶²⁸ If Dionysius emphasizes this feature with regard to the celebration of the Eucharist, he does so also with regard to the service of ordination:

The kiss at the conclusion of the clerical consecration also has a sacred meaning. For not only do all those belonging to the clerical orders give the kiss to the initiate but so too does the consecrating hierarch. When a mind has been made sacred by the type of its clerical activity, by its call from God . . . it deserves the love of its peers and of all those who belong to the most sacred orders. . . . So, then, this holy rite of the kiss between fellow clerics is fully appropriate. It denotes the sacred communion formed by like minds and the joyous shared love which ensures for the whole hierarchy the beauty of its conformity to God.⁶²⁹

While Dionysius's above reference to "love among peers" might seem to suggest division, his concluding sentence leaves us in no doubt as to the all-embracing nature of love. Members of the clergy are joined by goodwill and love to the laity no less than to one another. If the principle of hierarchy is characterized by relationships that are personal, it is characterized also by relationships that are inclusive. Dionysius presents a mystical doctrine in which there is no room for separation and enmity. God's love is passed down from the highest to the lowest of beings. Every member of the ecclesiastical

⁶²⁷ Dionysius, *DN* 11.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 121.

⁶²⁸ Louth (1989), p. 66.

⁶²⁹ Dionysius, *EH* 5.3.6, in Luibheid (1987), p. 243.

hierarchy fulfills a specific function which serves to imitate Christ's "unspeakable, incomprehensible goodness"⁶³⁰ and to draw all beings into fellowship.

Dionysius's mystical teaching, then, provides us with ample proof to dismiss the notion that ascetics of the early church favored isolation over neighborly relations and charity. The Dionysian mystic is an integral member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the quest for purification, illumination, and perfection, the mystic, like any Christian, depends on the hierarchical chain of interdependent beings and on the communal setting that is provided by the church. Separation from this hierarchical order implies separation from God.

If we now consider Dionysius's views on the material order and on the body in particular, we are able to observe that the Dionysian theme of interrelatedness is the driving force also behind the creation of the physical realm. In our earlier discussion of cataphatic theology, we already had occasion to observe that Dionysius looks to the material order as a display of divine glory. For him, the world is a theophany, a manifestation of God, and, as such, inherently sacred. The beauty and radiance of creation is a reflection and constant reminder of archetypal Beauty and Radiance. Dionysius insists that God and the world are inseparably linked:

The name "One" means that God is uniquely all things through the transcendence of one unity and that he is the cause of all without ever departing from that oneness. Nothing in the world lacks its share in the One. Just as every number participates in unity . . . so everything, and every part of everything, participates in the One. By being the One, it is all things.⁶³¹

If every part of everything participates in the One, so does the body. We need not look far to find proof of Dionysius's resounding affirmation of the body. He conveys this

⁶³⁰ Dionysius, *Ep* 8.1, in Luibheid (1987), p. 271.

⁶³¹ Dionysius, *DN* 13.2, in Luibheid (1987), p. 128.

sentiment concisely in his discussion of the rite for the dead. Given that the body shares with the soul in the struggles of earthly existence, it is a fitting companion for the soul, in this life and in the resurrection. As such, it deserves our reverence and a distinct place in the economy of salvation:

Following on these rites the hierarch lays the body in an honored place alongside the bodies of other saints of the same order. If the deceased lived, body and soul, a life pleasing to God, his body will deserve to have a share of the honors bestowed on the soul which was its companion in the sacred struggle. That is why divine justice links the body with the soul when final judgment is rendered to the soul, for the body also took part in the same journey along the road of holiness or impiety. Hence the blessed ordinances grant divine communion to both the one and the other. . . . Thus the entire person is made holy, the work of his salvation is all-embracing, and the full rites make known the totality of the resurrection that is to come.⁶³²

The fundamental message of Dionysius's teaching is remarkably consistent, regardless if he addresses the relationship between the body and the soul, as he does in the above passage, between members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, between humans and spiritual beings, or between humans and God. Every aspect of his teaching is guided by the principle of unity. Throughout, the question foremost on his mind pertains to the reversal of human fragmentation, be it internally or externally, and our return to oneness with God. To safeguard the return to divine unity, Dionysius introduces the principle of hierarchy, a feature which, in the Christian tradition, is very much his own. The celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies are the primary means of overcoming division and of experiencing a deifying union. As divine love, light, and knowledge pass down the chain of interdependent beings, human nature progressively assimilates to its source of being and is drawn into ever greater communion with fellow-beings and with God. For Dionysius, the divide that separates humans from God, from one another, and from themselves, including their bodies, is but a transitory state. Salvation is all-embracing and

⁶³² Dionysius, *EH* 7.3.9, in Luibheid (1987), p. 257.

reaches into the deepest recesses of the created order. It touches all beings who lead a life pleasing to God.

Given Dionysius's pronounced emphasis on unity, it comes as no surprise, perhaps, that he was an exceptionally adept synthesizer, who managed to shape diverse teachings into an organic whole. In his writings, he joined Neoplatonic themes and Christian doctrine with authority and ease. He reconciled the intellectual aspect of theology and its emotive, intuitive element with the same degree of command. In his mystical doctrine, Dionysius gave a place to silence as well as speech, to light but also to darkness. The hidden and the manifest captured his imagination to an equal degree.

Dionysius was no less adept at joining aspects of the Origenian and the Syrian strands of early Christian mystical thought. Well acquainted with the former legacy, he drew on many concepts previously expounded by Evagrius. Much of his doctrine on the ascetical life is colored by Evagrian teaching, most notably his views on the passions, on the virtuous, single-minded life, and on undistracted, imageless prayer. But Dionysius's true home was the world of early Christian Syria, and he acknowledged his roots by placing the church and its liturgy at the very center of the mystical life. For him, these were vital elements of Christian existence in more than one way. The church and its liturgy dominated people's external lives and brought Christians into close proximity with fellow-beings. Likewise, they brought humans into close proximity with the angels and allowed for their joined glorification around the throne of God. But the church and its liturgy also dominated the interior life of the Christian. If the inherent order of the soul was reestablished through the mediating activity of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the innermost self of every Christian could be transformed into a divine temple. By

celebrating an inner, spiritual liturgy, Christians could take their rightful place in the cosmic hierarchical arrangement and encounter God in an ecstatic union of love.

Dionysius's ability to synthesize earlier teachings and to wield them into a coherent, compelling system of his own was instrumental to the flowering of the prayer of the heart in the Byzantine period. Although Dionysius had less to say on the topic of prayer, especially as it relates to the heart, than many of his predecessors, his emphasis on the soul's triadic movement toward God, on the incomprehensibility of Divinity and the encounter with God in darkness, on the primacy of love in bringing about the deifying union, and on his abiding belief that our innermost self can be transformed into a divine dwelling-place shaped the doctrine of the prayer of the heart to a decisive degree.

Still today, members of the Christian community may reap much inspiration from his teaching, not least for presenting them with a mystical doctrine that places reintegration at its very center and heralds the unity of body and soul, of the individual and the community, and of the earthly and heavenly spheres. Dionysius's teaching on the pervasiveness of love allows contemporary religious seekers who feel separated from God to take heart and to know that no one who longs for divine communion is excluded from the outreach of heavenly love. If contemporary religious seekers object to the fact that this outreach of love depends on the hierarchical arrangement of the church, Dionysius's positive, inclusive interpretation of hierarchy may help them to look to the church as a body of initiation that is inherently relational in nature and that allows members to benefit from the sanctifying power of its liturgy.

We will now turn our attention to Maximus the Confessor, one of the most prominent early Byzantine theologians, an admirer of Dionysius, and a masterful

synthesizer in his own right. Like Dionysius, Maximus was of great importance to the rise of the prayer of the heart tradition and deeply committed to Christianity's Greek philosophical legacy without failing to heed its Syrian heritage. Like his predecessor, Maximus valued the detailed, systematic explication of Christian doctrine yet never abandoned the fundamental belief that humans come to know divine love and grace in a deeply experiential manner. For him, intellectual elucidation and the very personal encounter with God went hand in hand. Maximus further agreed with Dionysius that the quest for God never excludes the body. His belief in the goodness of creation and of embodied existence was lasting. Lasting, too, was his belief that the interiorization of the liturgy and the transformation of the heart into the new temple of God never call into question the relational nature of Christian existence and the importance of the church.

But Maximus was not only a skillful synthesizer. He was also an original thinker who did not adopt a doctrine without subjecting it to careful inquiry and evaluation. Hence, he forged a mystical teaching that was a work of originality no less than a work of synthesis. His ability to refine, elaborate, and, where necessary, correct earlier teachings enabled him to provide posterity with an ascetical doctrine that has remained integral to the theology of Orthodox Christianity to this day. Let us take a closer look at the teaching of this important early Byzantine theologian in the upcoming section.

Maximus the Confessor

If we wish to understand the importance of Maximus the Confessor to the tradition of the prayer of the heart which he gained, not least, for joining elements of the Hellenic and the Syrian mystical traditions into an ascetical doctrine of great insight and originality, we do well to start out by giving thought to his conception of the incarnation. As we do so, we soon come to realize that his emphasis on the incarnation of the Logos in history and in the individual soul gives rise to a teaching that is greatly invested in corporeality. Despite Maximus's interest in the spiritualization of human nature, he never failed to declare the beauty of the created order and the importance of the body. Nor did his interest in the spiritualization of the liturgy propel him to question the value of the church and its community. For him, as for many of his early Christian predecessors, the true follower of Christ—the true mystic—was not a person who strives for perfection by negating the reality of material existence. The genuine mystic never looks upon inner prayer as an isolating, divisive enterprise but envisions it as a vital means of entering ever more fully into relations with the body, the neighbor, the world, and God. For Maximus, the practice of inner prayer served but one purpose: to experience God's all-embracing love viscerally and to draw fellow-beings into its sphere of influence. To just how great a degree this understanding characterizes Maximus's ascetical doctrine will hopefully become apparent in the upcoming discussion.

Maximus conceives of the incarnation as an all-important turning point in the history of the cosmos and places it at the center of his doctrinal as well as mystical teaching.⁶³³ He elaborates his views on the enfleshment of the Logos by basing it firmly on the understanding that, in Christ, human and divine nature are joined in a hypostatic union. In accordance with the Chalcedonian definition, Maximus suggests that Christ embraces the extremes of divinity and humanity ‘without mixing’ (*asunchutos*), ‘without change’ (*atreptos*), ‘without division’ (*adiaretos*), and ‘without separation’ (*achoristos*).⁶³⁴ The unity of both natures is fully affirmed without any hint at mixture in the sense of confusion. Although inseparable, each modality preserves the individuality of its elements.⁶³⁵

Maximus describes the mystery of the hypostatic union which allowed Christ to join the two natures of his being in terms of their co-inherence, or *perichoresis*. The *perichoresis* of divinity and humanity effects a new mode of existence which is characterized by the ability to transcend the boundaries of each nature while keeping both modalities entirely intact.⁶³⁶ The human and divine elements are preserved and, at the same time, enhanced:

For there is a ‘certain new’ thing, characteristic of the new mystery, the *logos* of which is the ineffable mode of the coming together. For who knows how God assumes flesh and yet remains God, how, remaining true God, he is true man, showing himself truly both in his natural existence, and each through the other, and yet changing neither?⁶³⁷

Through *perichoresis*, divine and human energies co-operate and create a new, enhanced reality. The former nature is humanized and can work in an embodied way. The

⁶³³ Louth (1996), p. 51.

⁶³⁴ Aidan Nichols, *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 139.

⁶³⁵ Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd ed. (Chicago; La Salle, IL, 1995), pp. 43-44.

⁶³⁶ Thunberg (1995), p. 35.

⁶³⁷ Maximus, *Amb* 5, in Louth (1996), p. 177.

latter nature, in turn, begins to work in a divine manner and to manifest heavenly attributes. Each element remains what it is, while simultaneously transcending itself.⁶³⁸

While the quintessential hypostatic union of divine and human nature was effected in Christ, Maximus suggests that the ineffable co-inherence of two opposing natures, their energies, and their wills continues to take place in individual believers who are deified. Deification takes the process of union in Christ as its paradigm and allows for its ongoing reenactment. Maximus writes:

For they say that God and man are paradigms one of another, that as much as God is humanized to man through love for mankind, so much is man able to be deified to God through love, and that as much as man is caught up by God to what is known in his mind, so much does man manifest God, who is invisible by nature, through the virtues.⁶³⁹

For Maximus, deification is the perfect expression of the divine-human encounter. Deification implies an ecstatic union with Divinity in which humans attain likeness to God while the *logos* of their nature remains unaltered.⁶⁴⁰ By virtue of God's revelatory movement toward the created order and the believer's active pursuit of purification, illumination, and perfection, human nature reaches beyond its former limits and manifests Divinity through the virtues. It becomes God-like—a reflection of divine glory and love.

This is but a brief exposition of Maximus's understanding of the divine-human union that was effected at the incarnation and that marks the existence of all Christians who are being deified. We will return to this teaching at a later point in our discussion as we consider Maximus's conception of human embodiment. For now, let us begin our exploration of the theologian's ascetical doctrine by considering his views on the mystical

⁶³⁸ Thunberg (1995), p. 46.

⁶³⁹ Maximus, *Amb* 10.3, in Louth (1996), p. 101.

⁶⁴⁰ Polycarp Sherwood, "Introduction," in *St. Maximus the Confessor: The Ascetic Life, The Four Centuries on Charity*, trans. Polycarp Sherwood (Mahwah, NY: Newman Press, 1955), p. 72.

path. What are its salient features, and in what way does the quest for God allow for the progressive deification of human nature? Where does Maximus draw on earlier theologians, and in which instances does he correct, develop, or synthesize these teachings? On which occasions does he present a doctrine very much his own?

As we consider Maximus's mystical theology, we soon come to realize that he retains much of Evagrius's ascetical wisdom while tempering his questionable Origenian metaphysics.⁶⁴¹ Maximus does not agree, for instance, with Origen's belief in the pre-existence of the soul nor does Origen's understanding of the cosmos reflect sufficiently his own views on creation as an environment of God's loving care. Maximus does, however, embrace many viewpoints articulated by Origen and Evagrius on the inner dimension of human existence. His triadic division of human nature and of the soul are strongly reminiscent of Alexandrian Greek teaching. Maximus takes for granted the Origenian notion of the image of God in the human soul. His teaching on the passions, on vice and virtue, and on inner purification is deeply indebted to Evagrius, as is his conception of the mystical life in terms of a threefold structure.⁶⁴²

Like Evagrius, Maximus sees the ascetical life as passing through three stages, the stages of *praktike* or *praxis*, *gnosis*, and *theologia*. He agrees with Evagrius that these stages should be envisioned as parallel ways rather than as a chronological order, although, as in so many instances, he presses this point more than his fourth century predecessor does. While Maximus concurs with Evagrius that the active life is to some degree a preparatory stage, he insists that the struggle to defy vice and gain virtue always complements the *vita contemplativa*. The fight against the passions, in turn, depends on

⁶⁴¹ Louth (1996), p. 24.

⁶⁴² Thunberg (1995), p. 411.

rational discernment and the ability to detect the inner principles of created things. For Maximus, the active life and the practice of noetic skills go hand in hand:

He who embodies spiritual knowledge in his practice of the virtues and animates this practice with spiritual knowledge has found the perfect method of accomplishing the divine work.⁶⁴³

In his discussion of the first stage, Maximus follows Evagrius's lead by stressing the need for freedom from the passions. If humans wish to enter into the presence of God, they have to strive for inner purification; they have to conquer vice and acquire virtue. Maximus has a great deal to say on this topic. His hierarchy of the vices, which he bases on the threefold division of the soul, shows clear knowledge of the Evagrian system. Maximus, however, reworks and elaborates on Evagrius's enumeration by placing self-love (*philautia*) at its very center. For him, love of self is the source from which all passions flow.⁶⁴⁴ It is the origin and mother of evil.⁶⁴⁵ It destroys the unity of our inner faculties and ushers in a life of interior disintegration. Self-love separates humans from one another and is therefore also the cause of external fragmentation:

The devil has deceived us by guile in a malicious and cunning way, provoking us through self-love to sensual pleasures (cf. Gen. 3:1-5). He has separated us in our wills from God and from each other; he has perverted straightforward truth and in this manner has divided humanity, cutting it up into many opinions and fantasies.

Maximus's emphasis on the dangers of self-love and his introduction of four additional vices, the vices of rapacity, resentfulness, envy, and slander, all of which address our relationship with fellow-humans, are two aspects of Maximus's teaching that strongly suggest his abiding interest in the communal setting of Christian existence. As

⁶⁴³ Maximus, *VT* 4.88, in *Philokalia*, vol. 2, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 257.

⁶⁴⁴ Maximus, *Ep* 2, in Louth (1996), pp. 87-88.

⁶⁴⁵ Maximus, *VT* 1. 33, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 172.

we deepen our discussion of his mystical doctrine, we will see just how pervasive his emphasis on relationality is.

If enslavement to vice implies the misuse of human faculties, the progressive acquisition of virtue is a major tool of effecting their reintegration. According to Maximus, the virtues calm the concupiscible and irascible parts of the soul and strengthen its rational element. They bring peace to the body. The practice of the virtues allows humans to discern the true needs of the soul and the body:

If you want to be a just person, assign to each aspect of yourself—to your soul and your body—what accords with it. To the intelligent aspect of the soul assign spiritual reading, contemplation and prayer; to the incensive aspect, spiritual love, the opposite of hatred; to the desiring aspect, moderation and self-control; to the fleshly part, food and clothing, for these alone are necessary (cf. 1 Tim. 6:8).⁶⁴⁶

Maximus's enumeration of the virtues (faith, fear of God, self-mastery, patience and long-suffering, hope in God, detachment, and love) is very similar to the Evagrian hierarchy. Similar, too, is his understanding that the goal of *praktike* is not the repression of the passions but rather their sublimation or redirection. Neither theologian calls for the eradication of the passible elements of the soul but advises instead that they be harnessed and brought into accord with the soul's rational faculty.

A similar course of reasoning characterizes their understanding of the state of *apatheia*, which marks the climax of the first mystical phase. Dispassion does not imply a state of emotional detachment from the world and of disinterestedness but rather a state of reintegration and serenity in which the soul is no longer subject to thwarted thoughts and behaviors. The person who has attained dispassion "sees things clearly in their true nature. Consequently, he both acts and speaks with regard to all things in a manner which

⁶⁴⁶ Maximus, CC 4.44, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 105.

is fitting, and he is never deluded.”⁶⁴⁷ *Apatheia* describes a state of spiritual freedom in which the soul is capable of seeing things for what they really are. Sinful desires have been replaced by a new and better energy from God.⁶⁴⁸

Maximus also embraces Evagrius’s emphasis on charity as a vital aspect of *praktike* and of love as the quintessential means of acquiring knowledge of God. Charitable conduct and the cultivation of love counteract detachment which, although one aspect of the active life, may lead to withdrawal and isolation if given too much attention. But Maximus develops this aspect to an even greater degree than Evagrius and endows love with such importance as to place it at the very center of his ascetical teaching. For him, the entire mystical path, including the first stage, is about how we love.⁶⁴⁹ Love is the greatest of virtues and outlasts faith and hope.⁶⁵⁰ Love embraces the neighbor as well as the enemy. Long-suffering and kind, it enables the worthy to love all humans equally.⁶⁵¹

If we consider Maximus’s teaching on the second stage of the mystical ascent, we can observe that this stage is characterized largely by the principle of contemplation although, as we have seen, engagement in natural contemplation does not release the ascetic from the pursuit of the active life. Time and again, Maximus emphasizes the interplay and ultimate unity of the active and contemplative aspects of Christian existence.

Like Evagrius, Maximus distinguishes between a lower form of contemplation, the contemplation of visible things, and its higher expression, the contemplation of invisible

⁶⁴⁷ Maximus, CC 1.92, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 63.

⁶⁴⁸ Ware (1997), p. 398.

⁶⁴⁹ Louth (1996), p. 38.

⁶⁵⁰ Maximus, CC 3.100, in *Philokalia*. 2, p. 99.

⁶⁵¹ Maximus, CC 1.17, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 54.

things.⁶⁵² Maximus agrees with Evagrius that contemplation implies the discernment and examination of the *logoi* of created things, which manifest God's existence and glory. Contemplation calls for the exploration of their divine purpose of existence, their relationship to each other, and their relationship to the Logos. Through the contemplation of the *logoi*, the human mind advances toward knowledge of the Logos Creator, the one in whom they are all unified. Thereafter, the mind rises even further and, passing beyond knowledge of the Logos, attains union with God above all concepts and notions. Thanks to the *logoi* of creation, humans can know that God is. However, humans cannot know what God is.⁶⁵³

Created beings can be known rationally by means of the inner principles which are by nature intrinsic to such beings and by which they are naturally defined. But from our apprehension of these principles inherent in created things we can do no more than believe that God exists.⁶⁵⁴

In one aspect, however, Maximus's conception of the second stage departs considerably from the Evagrian systematization and presents a teaching which is very much his own. Maximus suggests that not all Christians have to pass through the second stage of the mystical path to be deified but can attain union with God on the basis of the *vita practica* alone. While divine union calls for pure prayer, the ability to engage in this form of contemplation is a gift of grace and does not require extensive immersion in the practice of natural contemplation. Hence, it is possible for non-contemplative monastics and for non-monastics in general to arrive at pure prayer and divine union without having traversed the second stage.

⁶⁵² Maximus, VT 2.98, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 208.

⁶⁵³ Thunberg (1995), p. 411.

⁶⁵⁴ Maximus, CT 1.9, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 115-116.

This element of Maximus's teaching is quite striking and allows us to observe how much importance he accords to the virtuous life and to the daily, practical aspect of Christian existence. It confirms our earlier observation that the active and contemplative lives are supplementary and, ultimately, belong together. If Christians can be deified on the basis of the active life alone, they are able to do so because the pursuit of such an existence, in and of itself, develops their rational faculties. An important means of engaging in noetic ascesis, even during the stage of *praktike*, is adherence to the commandments. According to Maximus, this practice trains the mind to discern the *logoi* of the commandments and, through them, to communicate with the Logos, whom they manifest. Keeping the commandments is one important component of the active life that provides partial knowledge of the Logos.

Let us now examine Maximus's teaching on the final stage of the quest for God by considering more closely his double concept of pure prayer. In the *Centuries on Charity*, Maximus writes:

Two state of pure prayer are exalted above all others. One is to be found in those who have not advanced beyond the practice of the virtues, the other in those leading the contemplative life. The first is engendered in the soul by fear of God and a firm hope in Him, the second by an intense longing for God and by total purification. The sign of the first is that the intellect, abandoning all conceptual images of the world, concentrates itself and prays without distraction or disturbance as if God Himself were present, as indeed He is. The sign of the second is that at the very onset of prayer the intellect is so ravished by the divine and infinite light that it is aware neither of itself nor of any other created thing, but only of Him who through love has activated such radiance in it. It is then that, being made aware of God's qualities, it receives clear and distinct reflections of Him.⁶⁵⁵

Maximus does not appear to subordinate one form of prayer to the other, although the second kind of prayer which is open to the 'gnostic,' or contemplative, seems to be

⁶⁵⁵ Maximus, CC 2.6, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 65-66.

more excellent.⁶⁵⁶ The first form of pure prayer is an undistracted prayer which is built directly on the virtues of the active life and, as we have seen, on some spiritual contemplation. Through the gift of grace, the mind is joined to God and able to withdraw from the thoughts of the world. It becomes God-like in its purity and capable of praying without ceasing. The second form of pure prayer is motivated by desirous love and aims at mystical union with God. As the mind transcends all impressions and conceptual images, it is rapt outside itself into the very presence of Divinity.⁶⁵⁷

In his discussion of both forms of prayer, Maximus emphasizes the fact that the intellect moves beyond thought to enter into the deep, undistracted contemplation of God. In this respect, his notion of prayer very much resembles Evagrius's concept of pure prayer. But if we take a closer look at Maximus's understanding of the latter form of prayer, we see quite clearly that the transition from the second to the third stage of the mystical quest is not only a matter of stripping away and simplifying but also, and more importantly, of loving.⁶⁵⁸ Although this feature is not absent from the teaching of Evagrius, its prevalence in the Maximian corpus calls to mind Dionysius's teaching on love rather than the doctrine of their fourth century predecessor. Like Dionysius, Maximus cannot conceive of pure prayer and divine union apart from blessed rapture:

Sabbaths of Sabbaths signify the spiritual calm of the deiform soul that has withdrawn the intellect even from contemplation of all the divine principles in created beings, that through an ecstasy of love has clothed it entirely in God alone, and that through mystical theology has brought it altogether to rest in God.⁶⁵⁹

Maximus is not only indebted to Dionysius for supplying him with the notion of ecstatic love. He strengthens the link with the mystical doctrine of his sixth century

⁶⁵⁶ Thunberg (1995), p. 364.

⁶⁵⁷ Maximus, *CC* 3.44, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 90.

⁶⁵⁸ Louth (1996), p. 43.

⁶⁵⁹ Maximus, *CT* 1.39, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 122.

predecessor further by placing the rapturous union with God within the context of divine unknowability. This feature is made explicit in the following words:

Thus he who through obedience has kept the commandments has achieved righteousness and, moreover, he has not cut himself off from union in love with Him who gave them. . . . When you have passed through the manifold principles relating to providence, you attain through unknowing the very principle of divine unity.⁶⁶⁰

For Maximus as for Dionysius, the highest stage of spiritual perfection is characterized by love and supreme ignorance. Christians who reach the climax of *theologia* are united with God, who is unfathomable and “who is more than infinite.”⁶⁶¹ They come face to face with the One who “transcends mind and sense and being and knowledge.”⁶⁶² Unlike the earlier stages, the last stage is altogether trans-rational in nature. Love and ignorance are all-pervasive. To convey the incomprehensible nature of the deifying encounter with God, Maximus adopts Dionysius’s apophatic terminology.

So far we have spent much time comparing the doctrines of Maximus and Evagrius. Before we turn to consider other major influences on Maximus’s mystical doctrine—as we have just seen, Dionysius being one of them, let us give thought to one last Maximian teaching that is greatly shaped by Evagrius. Let us take a closer look at Maximus’s anthropological teaching and consider the ways in which this highly sophisticated teaching lends a firm philosophical underpinning to the ancient tradition of inner prayer.

Maximus mirrors Evagrius’s anthropological teaching in many respects, not least in his conception of human nature as a triad of mind, soul, and body. Unlike Origen, who adopts the Pauline triad of body, soul, and spirit and distinguishes between the *nous*, the highest aspect of the soul, and the spirit, the divine element present in humans, Maximus

⁶⁶⁰ Maximus, *CT* 2.7-8, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 139.

⁶⁶¹ Maximus, *CC* 3.100, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 99.

⁶⁶² Maximus, *Amb* 10.17, in Louth (1996), p. 109.

and Evagrius commonly substitute the mind, or *nous*, for the biblical term spirit. All three theologians agree, however, that the *nous* is the organ of contemplation, its highest function being the uninterrupted meditation on divine realities and on God. Maximus, Evagrius, and Origen view the *nous* as a person's spiritual center and the locus of the divine-human encounter. The objective of the ascetical life, they further agree, is to gain control over the two passible elements of the soul. While we have seen in our earlier discussion of Evagrius that the concupiscible and irascible aspects of the soul, in their original state, assist the *nous* in its ascent, a state of excessive or misdirected desire and anger sabotages the intellectual aspirations of the soul, incites the body, and obstructs our natural movement toward God.

In his explication of our inner faculties, Maximus pays close attention not only to the *nous* but also to the *logos*, or reason, the rational part of the soul, and presents a complex picture of their relationship. Ever consistent in his teaching on the fundamental unity of the active and the contemplative life, Maximus discerns parallel movements of the mind and of reason and suggests that the former directs a person's gnostic activity while the latter directs the activity of the practical life. The mind is placed at the service of the quest for truth. It seeks to probe deeply into the essential nature of the cosmos and its divine source. Reason, in turn, propels the mystical seeker toward virtue.⁶⁶³

By means of it the mind, which is also called wisdom, as we said, increasing in the habit of contemplation in the ineffable silence and knowledge, is led to the truth by enduring and incomprehensible knowledge. For its part, the reason, which we called prudence, ends up at the good by means of faith in the active engagement of its body in virtue. In both these things consists the true science of divine and human matters, the truly secure knowledge and term of all divine wisdom according to Christians.⁶⁶⁴

⁶⁶³ Lars Thunberg, *Man and the Cosmos: The Vision of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), pp. 124-125.

⁶⁶⁴ Maximus, *Myst 5*, in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 191.

Despite the supremacy of the *nous*, Maximus does not separate it from the remaining human faculties. For him even more so than for Evagrius, human nature constitutes a unified whole. As a person's spiritual center, the *nous* integrates all inner faculties and, in response to grace, orients them toward God. In this task, it is aided by reason. It is assisted also by the will, a faculty to which the *nous* is so closely linked as to make it impossible for humans to will without employing their minds and of using the latter without being moved in their inherent faculty of desire. Together with the will, the *nous* chooses to direct human desire and love either toward divine things or toward things of the flesh. Given Maximus's emphasis on a person's inherent power of self-determination,⁶⁶⁵ humans are at all times free to determine their course of action:

No deiform soul is in its essence of greater value than any other deiform soul. For when God in His supernal goodness creates each soul in His own image, He brings it into being endowed with self-determination. By exercising this freedom of choice each soul either reaffirms its true nobility or through its actions deliberately embraces what is ignoble.⁶⁶⁶

Whatever course of action humans may choose, the soul, the will, and, as we will see shortly, the body support the *nous* in its every aspiration. For Maximus, the mystical quest is a truly integrative process that depends on intention, desire, thought, good will, and love. Time and again, Maximus insists on the fundamental unity of the human composite. His commitment to a holistic biblical understanding of humankind is deep and lasting.

The above comments on Maximus's teaching suggest a complex and sophisticated anthropological doctrine. In many instances, Maximus takes Evagrian anthropology as his starting-point and elaborates on his predecessor's system. On other occasions, as, for instance, in his exposition of the human will, he presents a doctrine that is very much his

⁶⁶⁵ Louth (1996), p. 60; Nichols (1993), pp. 200-203.

⁶⁶⁶ Maximus, *CT* 1.11, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 116.

own.⁶⁶⁷ What is important to establish at this point is Maximus's debt to the Christian Hellenic mystical strand for providing him with a vocabulary nuanced enough to articulate an anthropological teaching capable of describing a person's intrapsychic landscape and the dynamic nature of the return to God in great detail. Origen's legacy presented Maximus with a philosophical system that allowed him to explore how the ecstatic union with Divinity might be facilitated. By building on this legacy, he was able to convey to fellow-ascetics how virtuous conduct, contemplation, and the highest form of contemplation, pure prayer, could bring about their gradual transformation. Maximus was able to guide practitioners of inner prayer toward greater internal integration and toward the deification of their being.

The above discussion of Maximus's anthropological teaching provides us with the opportunity of revisiting a number of topics examined in earlier chapters, most notably the biblical doctrine of the heart. Bearing in mind that Maximus points to the *nous* as the spiritual center of human nature, the question inevitably arises if he looks to the heart, the biblical symbol of our personal unity, as a compatible term. Does Maximus, like Origen and Evagrius before him, use both expressions interchangeably and, if so, what might this suggest about the overall orientation of his ascetical doctrine? Would recourse to the concept of the heart endow his teaching with a distinctly affective tone, a tone we are wont to associate with the mystical heritage of the ancient Syrian church?

⁶⁶⁷ Maximus articulated his psychology of the will in response to his involvement in the heated discussions on the two wills of Christ. Of special importance is his distinction between the gnostic will, which he links closely to our separation from God, our sinfulness, and our inability to see clearly and the natural will, which implies accurate vision and a person's ability to turn freely to God. For an in-depth discussion of this teaching, see Thunberg (1995), pp. 208-230. A helpful introduction is provided by Louth (1996), pp. 59-62.

We need not search long to realize that Maximus fully embraces the biblical language of the heart and that, for him, the compatibility of the terms heart and intellect is beyond dispute:

This applies to those who no longer spend their time on things to do with the body, but strive to cleanse the intellect (*nous*) (which the Lord calls 'heart' [*kardian*]) from hatred and dissipation.⁶⁶⁸

Given the interchangeable use of both terms, it is little surprising that Maximus pays close attention to the biblical notion of the heart as the seat of spiritual knowledge:

If, as St Paul says, Christ dwells in our hearts through faith (cf. Eph. 3:17), and all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in Him (cf. Col. 2:3), then all the treasures of wisdom and spiritual knowledge are hidden in our hearts.⁶⁶⁹

For Maximus, the heart is not only the seat of knowledge and wisdom but also God's dwelling-place:

When God comes to dwell in such a heart, He honours it by engraving His own letters on it through the Holy Spirit, just as He did on the Mosaic tablets (cf. Exod. 31:18). This He does according to the degree to which the heart, through practice of the virtues and contemplation, has devoted itself to the admonition which bids us, in a mystical sense, 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen. 35:11).⁶⁷⁰

Maximus's teaching on the heart is unambiguous. The heart is a temple in which Christ resides through faith. It is a place of divine indwelling, provided it is pure, virtuous, and capable of deep meditation. Maximus elaborates on his understanding of the heart as the seat of wisdom and as God's temple in yet another passage. In it, he suggests that this inner faculty also serves as "a workshop of evil thoughts," an idea that calls to mind the Syrian conception of the heart in terms of an apocalyptic arena, a battlefield between the forces of good and evil:

But in none is He fully present as the author of wisdom except in those who have understanding, and who by their holy way of life have made themselves fit to receive His

⁶⁶⁸ Maximus, CC 4.73, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 109.

⁶⁶⁹ Maximus, CC 4.70, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 109.

⁶⁷⁰ Maximus, CT 2.80, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 158.

indwelling and deifying presence. For everyone who does not carry out the divine will, even though he is a believer, has a heart which, being a workshop of evil thoughts, lacks understanding.⁶⁷¹

Even after this brief sample of relevant passages from Maximus's corpus, we can discern a distinct Syrian tenor. The heart is home to virtue and vice. It may be a treasure trove or a place of darkness and sin. In its ideal state, that is, once it has been purified by virtue and illuminated by contemplation, it is the point of self-transcendence where humans encounter God. Such a heart serves as the place where, "the Logos of God becomes manifest and radiant in us. . . . In those found worthy, the Logos of God is transfigured to the degree to which each has advanced in holiness, and He comes to them with His angels in the glory of the Father."⁶⁷² Like his Syrian predecessors and like Macarius, in particular, Maximus looks to the purified heart as a place illuminated by the glory of God. For him, this experience is of such consequence as to invite comparison with Christ's transfiguration on Mount Tabor.

Maximus's conception of our deepest self as a temple which, "mystically built by peace, becomes in spirit the dwelling-place of God,"⁶⁷³ as well as his reference to the transfiguration and its rendition in terms of an inner transformation reintroduces us to a theme we have traced throughout this study: the interiorization of the biblical glory tradition and the reconceptualization of the temple motif in terms of the purified heart. For Maximus, the transformation of the heart into a place of divine theophany and indwelling is a truly compelling motif and constitutes a cornerstone of his mystical teaching. Let us take a closer look at this feature by giving thought, first, to the degree to which it emphasizes the deeply felt, experiential nature of the quest for God.

⁶⁷¹ Maximus, *VT* 1.73, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 180-181.

⁶⁷² Maximus, *CT* 2.14, 15, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 140-141.

⁶⁷³ Maximus, *CT* 1.53, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 125.

Maximus's understanding of the encounter with God in the temple of the heart as a visceral experience is not difficult to comprehend, especially if we consider his emphasis on love as the driving force behind human deification. Let us recall that for Maximus, the spiritual life is about how we love; it is about how we relate to ourselves, to others, and to God.⁶⁷⁴ As we have seen, love is the defining feature of Christian existence. Love of the neighbor and of the enemy purifies the heart and facilitates pure prayer. At the final stage of the mystical quest, divine love takes the intellect out of itself and, carrying it beyond knowledge, allows for an ecstatic union with God. Love characterizes the beginning and the end of the quest for perfection.

By insisting on the primacy of love, Maximus conveys his abiding belief in the conscious, inner experience of divine power and in the participatory nature of the mystical journey.⁶⁷⁵ As we have seen, this feature is by no means absent from the theology of Origen and Evagrius. But it is particularly pronounced in the mystical teaching of the ancient Syrian church and vividly recalls the Macarian notion of the heart as it becomes aware of God's inner presence. Maximus's emphasis on participatory knowledge of Divinity also calls to mind the Dionysian distinction between the rational theological method and its symbolic, mystical counterpart. Maximus, for his part, writes:

According to the wise, we cannot use our intelligence to think about God at the same time as we experience Him, or have an intellection of Him while we are perceiving Him directly. By 'think about God' I mean speculate about Him on the basis of an analogy between Him and created beings. By 'perceiving Him directly' I mean experiencing divine or supranatural realities through participation. . . . What we have said is confirmed by the fact that, in general, our experience of a thing puts a stop to our thinking about it, and our direct perception of it supersedes our intellection of it.⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷⁴ Louth (1996), p. 39.

⁶⁷⁵ Plested (2004), p. 235.

⁶⁷⁶ Maximus, *VT* 4.31, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 242-243.

Maximus leaves his audience in no doubt that experiential knowledge of God is superior to speculative knowledge. The latter is relative, non-participatory, and dependent on human constructs. It does not suffice to propel humans into the presence of God. For this to occur, mystical seekers have need of knowledge that brings total perception of what is known through grace and direct experience.⁶⁷⁷ Only if the heart is touched by grace and consciously perceives the stirring of holy love can humans apprehend God in a deep, all-encompassing manner. For Maximus, the notion of the heart as God's temple is at the very center of his teaching on the participatory experience of God.

Maximus provides further insight into his doctrine of the heart and the heart's function as an interior temple in the *Mystagogia*, a work on the Eucharistic liturgy. In it, he adopts the approach of his predecessors and establishes an explicit link between the spiritual altar of the heart and the altar of the church. The fact that he envisions the mind rather than the heart as the inner altar in the below passage need not give cause to concern, if we recall his tendency to use the two terms interchangeably:

And again from another point of view he [Dionysius the Areopagite] used to say that holy Church is like a man because for the soul it has the sanctuary, for mind it has the divine altar, and for body it has the nave.⁶⁷⁸

Maximus devotes the final three chapters of the *Mystagogia* to an illustration of how the movement of the liturgy provides an interpretation of a person's inner movement toward God. Like the liturgy of the church, the celebration of the interior liturgy around the altar of the heart introduces humans to divine life. If Christians offer their pure, moral selves from the spiritual altar, they become suffused with divine light:

⁶⁷⁷ Maximus, *VT* 4.31, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 242. For a discussion of this feature, see Plested (2004), pp. 235-236.

⁶⁷⁸ Maximus, *Myst* 4, in Berthold (1985), pp. 189-190.

Conversely, man is a mystical church, because through the nave which is his body he brightens by virtue the ascetic force of the soul by the observance of the commandments in moral wisdom. Through the sanctuary of his soul he conveys to God in natural contemplation through reason the principles of sense purely in spirit cut off from matter. Finally, through the altar of the mind he summons the silence abounding in song in the innermost recesses of the unseen and unknown utterance of divinity by another silence, rich in speech and tone. And as far as man is capable, he dwells familiarly within mystical theology and becomes such as is fitting for one made worthy of his indwelling and he is marked with his dazzling splendor.⁶⁷⁹

If the external celebration of the liturgy brings about union with God, so does its internal celebration. The unifying progression from nave, sanctuary, to altar is mirrored by the three stages of the mystical quests which unite body, soul, and mind. Just as the movement of the public celebration enables participants to experience the healing power of divine grace, so the movement of the interior liturgy reverses inner fragmentation and reestablishes divine order.

According to Maximus, the reintegration of human faculties and the restoration of inner order readies Christians for their God-given task of mediating between all that has been divided.⁶⁸⁰ Once the order of the personal universe, the microcosm, has been reestablished, deified humans work toward the healing of divisions throughout the macrocosm. For Maximus, the close correspondence of the individual soul, the church, and the world at large is a given.⁶⁸¹ Each is a reflection of the other. Return to oneness on a personal level manifests itself on the communal and the cosmic level.

Reintegration and unity is an all-pervasive theme in Maximus's mystical doctrine. Unity characterizes the original state of the individual, the church, and the created order. Body and soul are one, as are all members of the Christian community. Despite his

⁶⁷⁹ Maximus, *Myst* 4, in Berthold (1985), p. 190.

⁶⁸⁰ Thunberg (1995), p. 231.

⁶⁸¹ Cooper (2005), p. 194.

emphasis on the interiorization and spiritualization of the liturgy, Maximus never calls into question the importance of the body and of fellow-beings to the quest for perfection. Like his predecessors, he believes that the severance of relations with material, communal existence inhibits rather than advances the apprehension of Divinity.

If we wish to explore Maximus's views on human embodiment and to better understand why he cannot conceive of the mystical quest apart from the body, we do well to return to our opening comments on his conception of the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity. Let us remember that the enfleshment of the Logos made possible the co-inherence of human and divine nature without subjecting either to confusion, change, division, or separation. Let us also recall that, as a result of this union, the complete integration of Christ's human nature was effected which allowed the Son to ascend to the right hand of the Father in his full humanity, that is, in body and soul.⁶⁸² For Maximus, the implications of this teaching for the human condition are far-reaching. Christ's ascension with his earthly body, consubstantial with ours, bestowed upon humankind the gift of being deified in its entirety. There can be no sundering of the body and the soul. Like the union of divinity and humanity, the union of our material and immaterial nature is indissoluble. The co-existence of both realities safeguards the resurrection of the body and its participation in eternal life.⁶⁸³

To be sure, Maximus places the body at the lower rung of an ordered hierarchy that rises through the soul and the intellect to God. The body is comparable neither to the sanctuary nor to the altar of the church but rather to its nave. Like Ephrem, who, in his *Hymns on Paradise*, likens the body to the lower slopes of the divine mountain, Maximus

⁶⁸² Thunberg (1995), p. 399.

⁶⁸³ Thunberg (1995), p. 100.

does not question the superiority of the soul over the body and of the intellect over the soul. Yet he proposes that if this order is maintained, the body, too, gains access to God. By virtue of its union with the soul and its vital contributions to the mystical quest, the body is not excluded from the transformation to incorruptible life.⁶⁸⁴

Having now completed the stage of growth, the soul receives the kind of incorruptible nourishment which sustains the godlike perfection granted to it, and receives a state of eternal well-being. Then the infinite splendours inherent in this nourishment are revealed to the soul, and it becomes god by participation in divine grace, ceasing from all activity of intellect and sense, and at the same time suspending all the natural operations of the body. For the body is deified along with the soul through its own corresponding participation in the process of deification. Thus God alone is made manifest through the soul and the body, since their natural properties have been overcome by the superabundance of His glory.⁶⁸⁵

Just as the nave is an integral part of the church and provides access to the sanctuary and the altar, just as the divine mountain cannot be ascended without first climbing its lower slopes, so God cannot be apprehended without the body. Maximus never excludes our embodied existence from the deifying encounter with Divinity. As in Christ, God shines forth through the perfection of human nature in its entirety. As the locus of the accomplishment of the divine plan, the body cannot be ignored.⁶⁸⁶

To answer the question of how the body assists in the ascent to God, we need only take another look at Maximus's earlier cited comments on the human composite as a mystical church. In them, he proposes that, through the body, the Christian "brightens by virtue the ascetic force of the soul by the observance of the commandments in moral wisdom."⁶⁸⁷ For Maximus, the pursuit of the active life, i.e. the keeping of the commandments and the acquisition of virtue, which is an all-important means of drawing close to God is rooted in the body. The pursuit of bodily virtues, among which the

⁶⁸⁴ Cooper (2005), p. 102.

⁶⁸⁵ Maximus, *CT* 2.88, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 160.

⁶⁸⁶ Nichols (1993), p. 157.

⁶⁸⁷ Maximus, *Myst* 4, in Berthold (1985), p. 190.

theologian numbers the ministering to people's needs,⁶⁸⁸ teaches mystical seekers to imitate divine love through good works.⁶⁸⁹ It propels Christians to reach out to fellow-humans and to engage in acts of forgiveness, almsgiving, and intercession. Through immersion in the relational dimension of the Christian life, an immersion which is made possible by our embodied nature, the faithful are able to work toward their gradual transformation. For Maximus, the body and the pursuit of bodily virtues are thus at the very heart of the mystical life. Our incarnate existence allows for social relations. It allows for exchanges with fellow-beings which, if cultivated and deepened, propel humans into the presence of God. The inherent link between the physical and the relational conditions of the Christian life and their joined role in bringing about a person's transformation is elucidated by Brown in the following words:

The rhythms of the body and, with the body, his concrete social relations determined the life of the monk: his continued economic dependence on the settled world for food, the hard school of day-to-day collaboration with his fellow-ascetics in shared rhythms of labor, and mutual exhortation in the monasteries slowly changed his personality.⁶⁹⁰

Maximus deepens his discussion of the body as an important tool of mystical ascent by suggesting that the pursuit of bodily virtues allows humans to experience a second incarnation, this being an incarnation in the virtues: "The divine Logos, who once for all was born in the flesh, always in His compassion desires to be born in spirit in those who desire Him. He becomes an infant and moulds Himself in them through the virtues."⁶⁹¹ Christ incarnates himself through the virtuous life, the foundation of which is provided by embodied existence. As suggested above, daily adherence to bodily virtues allows mystical seekers to imitate Christ and to be reconciled to their neighbors. As they

⁶⁸⁸ Maximus, *CC* 2.57, in *Philokalia* 2, p. 75.

⁶⁸⁹ Cooper (2005), p. 235.

⁶⁹⁰ Brown (1988), p. 237.

⁶⁹¹ Maximus, *VT* 1.8, in *Philokalia* 2, pp. 165-166.

manifest God-like attributes, that is, as Christ moulds himself in them through the virtues, they secure their movement toward Divinity and toward deification.⁶⁹² Maximus's respect for the body and his belief in the salvific nature of physical existence are all-pervasive. He cannot conceive of union with God apart from embodiment and the relational context to which it gives rise.

The reality of our physical existence presents us with constant challenges. For Maximus, these challenges, whether of a physical or a social nature, are the true testing ground on which human beings establish their devotion and love of God. Embodied existence provides the arena in which human consciousness is altered.⁶⁹³ Like so many of his early Christian predecessors, Maximus is convinced that perfection is forged within a practical, corporeal, and communal setting. Deification implies relationality. It implies daily encounters with the body and with fellow-beings. It implies the ability to respond to these encounters with humility and love.

Throughout the discussion of Maximus's ascetical doctrine, we have revisited teachings considered in earlier chapters. We have seen how the seventh century theologian elaborated on these teachings and incorporated them into an organic system very much his own. On the one hand, we could argue that Maximus's ability to unite Origenian and Syrian teachings with such mastery displays his gift as an astute theologian and synthesizer which, no doubt, he was. But we might also suggest that his task of bringing into accord elements of Christianity's two mystical legacies was eased by their inherent compatibility. As suggested throughout this study, both sets of teachings seek to

⁶⁹² Thunberg (1985), p. 108.

⁶⁹³ Brown (1988), p. 237.

indicate how humans may overcome inner fragmentation by turning toward the virtuous life and by purifying their deepest selves. Both legacies look to prayer as a vital tool of progressing toward perfection and of perceiving the all-pervasive presence of Divinity. They speak of prayer as an act of spiritual worship which transforms the Christian into a temple of God and allows for participation in divine life. The Hellenic Christian as well as the Syrian Christian strands of mystical thought look to the daily challenges of embodied, communal existence as a unique opportunity of imitating Christ and of attaining oneness with God.

Maximus articulated this understanding of the ascetical life with unprecedented insight and clarity. His familiarity with the Origenian tradition provided him with the philosophical learnedness to refine Evagrius's sophisticated doctrine of holistic anthropology and spiritual advancement. The Origenian legacy showed him how theoretical constructs might be placed within a practical context and guide religious aspirants toward the direct encounter with God. It also familiarized him with the biblical glory tradition and its closely related temple imagery in its spiritualized, interiorized form.

Through the study of the Syrian mystical legacy, Maximus was able to deepen his inquiry into the biblical tradition of the heart. He was able to explore more fully the emotive dimension of the mystical life and to observe how the greatest of virtues, love, propels the soul into the presence of God. While he encountered many of these elements in the teachings of the Hellenic Christian world, the heart-centered language of Syrian ascetics, from Aphrahat to Dionysius, infused his teaching with a new degree of warmth and affection. The writings of Syrian masters inspired Maximus to place his mystical doctrine firmly within a liturgical context and to insist on the holistic conception of

human nature. By doing so and by pointing to the incarnation as the all-important cosmic event that ushered in a new mode of human existence, Maximus articulated a doctrine on inner prayer that invited a deeply personal encounter with God yet did not call for the negation of relations with material reality. Maximus looked to prayer as a spiritual offering and as a means of glorifying God internally without questioning the importance of embodied existence and its inherently communal character. While the celebration of the interior liturgy raised Christians into the direct presence of God, Maximus insisted that the intoxicating union with the Unknowable had its humble beginnings in a very practical, day-to-day existence. Mystics were rapt outside themselves at the pinnacle of the quest for perfection and granted the supreme gift of deification only after toiling long and arduously in the physical, communal here and now.

It is this aspect of Maximus's mystical doctrine, i.e. the idea that divine intimacy depends on the embodied, relational nature of human existence, which may benefit contemporary religious seekers the most. By immersing themselves in the ascetical writings of Maximus, today's Christians are constantly reminded of the fact that the quest for God is not an abstract, disembodied, and secluded venture but a deeply felt and very practical journey that is rooted in physical existence. Through the body, we are present to the world. The body challenges us to meet the many trials of daily living. By meeting these challenges, humans are provided with the opportunity of reaching beyond former limitations and of working toward their gradual inner transformation. Embodied existence and the communal life to which it gives rise sensitize religious seekers to the human condition and propel them to seek the reintegration of warring factions. It allows them to engage in the God-given task of mediating between all that has been sundered. The implications of such a mystical doctrine are profound. Commitment to the Christian life

of prayer, as envisioned by Maximus, promises to reconcile humans to themselves, to one another, and to the world at large. It promises greater unity on a microcosmic and macrocosmic level. In a world, such as ours, in which the transcendence of human strife and unrest is ever of concern, Maximus's teaching is a constant source of hope and inspiration.

CHAPTER 6

Retrospective and Prospective

The Desert Tradition

Throughout this study, we have considered the influence of Greek Christian and Syrian Christian thought on the tradition of the prayer of the heart. In the exploration of the biblical motif of the heart and its early Christian usage, its interpretation as God's temple, and its inherent link with embodied, relational existence, we have not had occasion to examine the impact the Christian teachers of ancient Egypt exerted over this ancient tradition. While we examined the ascetical theology of Evagrius, a writer who owed much to the teachings of the Egyptian desert fathers, we did so primarily with the intention of tracing the influence of Origen on his teaching rather than the influence of the early abbas. The following brief retrospective of the desert tradition is being included in the present study in the hope of addressing this tradition's contributions to the prayer of the heart in some small measure and of allowing for fuller coverage of this ancient practice.

As we begin our inquiry into the ascetical teachings of late ancient Egypt, we do well to call attention to the important synthesizing role the desert tradition played from the fifth century onward.⁶⁹⁴ Reasons for this development are largely of a textual nature. By the fifth century, Syrian literature on prayer had begun to be propagated in the Greek

⁶⁹⁴ McGuckin (2001), p. 55.

language. Simultaneously, the teachings of the Origenian tradition were becoming more widely known. McGuckin describes the effect of this development on the Christian mystical tradition in the following manner:

Both Syrian and Origenian Christian thought came into close proximity in Egypt with local African patterns of spirituality. The resultant mix was potent, and characterized a richly polychromatic spiritual doctrine after the late fourth century which Byzantium adopted and exported to the wider Christian world.⁶⁹⁵

The teaching of the early Egyptian abbas was characterized by a deep awareness of the necessity for purity of heart and for the constant guarding of this inner region against the pouring in of demonic thoughts. This predominantly 'Niptic'⁶⁹⁶ approach of the early fathers is exemplified in the following passages:

The first work of a monk is to offer pure prayer to God with nothing reprehensible on his conscience. . . . Then if, as we said before, we stand before God with a pure heart and free from all the passions and vices we have mentioned, we can, insofar as this is possible, see even God.⁶⁹⁷

I want you to know, my children, that I cease not to pray to God for you night and day, that He may open for you the eyes of your hearts, to see the many hidden malignities which the evil spirits pour upon us daily in this present time. I want God to give you a heart of knowledge and a spirit of discernment, that you may be able to offer your hearts as a pure sacrifice before the Father, in great holiness and without blemish.⁶⁹⁸

The above citations address the importance of purity of heart, a biblical teaching which, as we have seen, features prominently in early Christian Greek and Syrian thought. The above citations, especially the latter words by the renowned desert father Antony, also reintroduce us to the by now very familiar idea of the heart as a liturgical site. A passage by Ammonas, Antony's great disciple, confirms the idea that the notion of

⁶⁹⁵ McGuckin (2001), p. 55.

⁶⁹⁶ As McGuckin points out, the 'Niptic' tradition is concerned with guarding the heart's awareness against the stream of defiling passions that prevents deep contemplation of God; see McGuckin (1999), p. 76.

⁶⁹⁷ *The Additions of Rufinus* I 22-28, in *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Norman Russell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), p. 146.

⁶⁹⁸ Antony, *Letters* 6, in *Antony the Great: The Letters of St. Antony*, trans. Derwas J. Chitty (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975), p. 18.

the heart as an inner temple and a place of divine revelation, while not yet fully developed, is not absent from the writings of the earliest of abbas:

Night and day I pray that the power of God may increase in you, and reveal to you the great mysteries of the Godhead, which it is not easy for me to utter with the tongue, because they are great and are not of this world, and are not revealed save only to those who have purified their hearts from every defilement.⁶⁹⁹

Yet despite references to the heart as a site of theophany, the literature of the early desert fathers draws on the biblical tradition of the heart primarily to encourage the guarding of thoughts, the discernment of demonic maneuvers, and the adherence to ascetical practice.⁷⁰⁰ Furthermore, the literature of the first generation of Egyptian elders does not seek to present a coherent doctrine of inner prayer. Its advice on the purification of the heart and on the engagement in prayer is unsystematic and experiential. Ascetics longing for closeness with God are encouraged to

Just stretch out your hands and say "Lord, as you will and as you know best, have mercy." And if the conflict grows fiercer, say "Lord, help!" He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy.⁷⁰¹

For a more detailed exposition on the inner path of prayer and for greater emphasis on the purified heart as the altar of God's radiant presence, we need to look beyond the Niptic writings of the early desert fathers to the later Sinaitic tradition.⁷⁰² Here, we encounter the works of John Climacus (c. 575-c. 650), the Abbot of Sinai monastery, who, in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, provides systematic guidance on the quest for higher psychic awareness:

Among beginners, discernment is real self-knowledge; among those midway along the road to perfection, it is a spiritual capacity to distinguish unfailingly between what is truly

⁶⁹⁹ Ammonas, *Letters* 6, in *The Letters of Ammonas, Successor of Saint Anton*, trans. Derwas J. Chitty (Oxford: SLG Press, 1979), p. 7.

⁷⁰⁰ McGuckin (1999), p. 79.

⁷⁰¹ *Macarius the Great* 19, in Ward (1984), p. 131.

⁷⁰² McGuckin (2001), p. 61.

good and what in nature is opposed to the good; among the perfect, it is a knowledge resulting from divine illumination, which with its lamp can light up what is dark in others. To put the matter generally, discernment is—and is recognized to be—a solid understanding of the will of God in all times, in all places, in all things; and it is found only among those who are pure in heart, in body, and in speech.⁷⁰³

As we can infer from the following words, John was not unaware of the biblical temple motif and its interiorization:

To keep a regular watch over the heart is one thing; to guard the heart by means of the mind is another for the mind is the ruler and high priest offering spiritual sacrifices to Christ. When heaven's holy fire lays hold of the former, it burns them because they still lack purification. . . . But as for the latter, it enlightens them in proportion to the perfection they have achieved. It is one and the same fire that is called that which consumes (cf. Heb. 12:29) and that which illuminates (cf. John 1:9).⁷⁰⁴

A further prominent theologian of the Sinaitic tradition is the eighth century Abbot Hesychius. Like John Climacus, Hesychius gives detailed instruction on the pursuit of the mystical life and expands on the biblical notion of the heart by emphasizing not only the need for its constant guarding but also its vital function as a place of divine theophany and indwelling. Hesychius writes:

We have learned from experience that for one who wishes to purify his heart it is a truly great blessing constantly to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus against his intelligible enemies. Notice how what I speak of from experience concurs with the testimony of Scripture. . . . Our Lord Himself says: 'Without Me you can do nothing. If a man dwells in Me, and I in him, then he brings forth much fruit'; . . . Prayer is a great blessing, and it embraces all blessings, for it purifies the heart, in which God is seen by the believer.⁷⁰⁵

The writings of John Climacus and Hesychius are of interest for the tradition of the prayer of the heart not only for expounding on the biblical notion of the heart and for suggesting its interiorization, a feature which we have come to associate with much early Christian mystical thought. In their writings, we also find concrete instruction on the invocation of the holy name. As suggested by Hesychius's above words, the constant

⁷⁰³ John Climacus, *Ladder* 26, in John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 229.

⁷⁰⁴ John Climacus, *Ladder* 28, Luibheid and Russell (1982), p. 280.

⁷⁰⁵ Hesychius of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 62, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 173.

repetition of the Lord's name was considered a vital aid against demonic attacks and a valuable means of facilitating deep meditation on God. Its ceaseless recitation kept the mind wholly focused on the Savior and allowed practitioners to enter into a very personal relationship with the incarnate Logos. It was an explicit confession of faith.⁷⁰⁶ For John Climacus, the continual invocation of the holy name 'Jesus,' accompanied by a sense of *penthos* and an appeal for God's mercy,⁷⁰⁷ was the strongest of weapons in heaven and on earth.⁷⁰⁸ It allowed Christians to flog their enemies and to procure divine protection.

John Climacus as well as Hesychius were of lasting significance to the dissemination of the Jesus Prayer, as the recitation of the short phrase "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me" came to be known. Their contributions to the tradition of the prayer of the heart were all the greater for introducing to the invocation of this formula a physical dimension. Hesychius admonished his disciples to combat evil by letting the words of prayer "cleave to your breath."⁷⁰⁹ Here we may have a first indication that early Christians sought to overcome demonic maneuvers and to deepen relations with God by relying on the somatic technique of coordinating the words uttered in prayer with the rhythm of the breath,⁷¹⁰ a technique which, as we will see shortly in our discussion of the hesychast tradition, was embraced by Gregory of Sinai. Similar advice is given by John Climacus who cautions novices to "let the remembrance of Jesus be present with your every breath."⁷¹¹

⁷⁰⁶ Ware (1997b), p. 403.

⁷⁰⁷ Ware (1997b), p. 404.

⁷⁰⁸ John Climacus, *Ladder 21*, in Luibheid and Russell (1982), p. 200.

⁷⁰⁹ Hesychius of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 182, in *Philokalia* 1, pp. 194-195.

⁷¹⁰ Ware (1997b), 408.

⁷¹¹ John Climacus, *Ladder 27*, in Luibheid and Russell (1982), p. 270.

Two further ascetical teachers are of interest to our consideration of the desert tradition and its important role in shaping the prayer of the heart. These are the fifth century Bishop of Photike, Diadochus,⁷¹² and the sixth century Archimandrite of Gaza, Dorotheus.⁷¹³ Diadochus's contributions are of a twofold nature. He made ample use of the Jesus Prayer, believing that the repetition of the same formula was essential if the intellect was to be brought from a diversity of thoughts and images to a state of single-pointed concentration on God.⁷¹⁴ By replacing the array of monologistic formulae commonly used among the early desert fathers with the uniform invocation of the Lord's name, Diadochus contributed significantly to the rise of the Jesus Prayer as the quintessential prayer of Eastern Orthodoxy. Its brevity and simplicity came to be viewed as a powerful tool of reaching "beyond language into silence, beyond discursive thinking into intuitive awareness."⁷¹⁵

When we have blocked all its outlets by means of the remembrance of God, the intellect requires of us imperatively some task which will satisfy its need for activity. For the complete fulfillment of its purpose we should give it nothing but the prayer 'Lord Jesus'. 'No one', it is written, 'can say "Lord Jesus" except in the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:3). Let the intellect continually concentrate on these words within its inner shrine with such intensity that it is not turned aside to any mental images. Those who meditate unceasingly upon this glorious and holy name in the depths of their heart can sometimes see the light of their own intellect.⁷¹⁶

From the above lines we can infer that Diadochus was of importance to the tradition of the prayer of the heart not only for championing the use of the holy name but also for articulating a doctrine of inner prayer that synthesized elements of Hellenic and Syrian Christian mystical teachings. The concept of the *nous* was as familiar to him as

⁷¹² Although Photike is located in Greece, Diadochus appears to have had close contact with the desert tradition and, for this reason, has been included in this discussion; see McGuckin (2001), p. 62.

⁷¹³ Dorotheus was a Syrian by origin but became closely associated with the desert tradition after his arrival in Egypt to study with famous spiritual elders; see McGuckin (2001), p. 70.

⁷¹⁴ Ware (1986), p. 178.

⁷¹⁵ Ware (1986), p. 178.

⁷¹⁶ Diadochus of Photike, *On Spiritual Knowledge* 59, in *Philokalia* 1, p. 270.

biblical heart language. His emphasis on prayer as the laying aside of all thoughts and mental images is clearly Evagrian in inspiration as is his belief that the Jesus Prayer allowed its practitioners to attain a vision of “the light of their own intellect.” Reminiscent of Syrian mystical teachings in particular, although far from absent in the writings of Origenian theologians, is Diadochus’s pronounced interest in the liturgical conceptualization of the heart in terms of an inner shrine as well as his emphasis on the affective, felt experience of God in our innermost selves.

With Dorotheus, the chief disciple of the renowned spiritual elders Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, we encounter yet another great syntheziser of the Egyptian desert. Like Diadochus, he was instrumental to the intermarriage of Christianity’s Greek, Egyptian, and Syrian mystical strands for later Byzantine monasticism.⁷¹⁷ Like Diadochus, Dorotheus suggested that the Jesus Prayer was an all-important means of remembering Divinity continually and of inviting its revelation in the human heart. He, too, looked to this interior region as the spiritual center of human beings. In the heart, humans drew uniquely close to God. Here, they perceived the pouring in of divine grace. The visceral nature of this experience is conveyed in an account which Dorotheus supplies of his transformative encounter with the Lord. He writes:

Then he stood in front of me and, stretching out his hand, touched me on the breast and tapped me on the chest with his fingers, saying:

I waited, I waited for the Lord
And he stooped down to me;
He heard my cry.
He drew me from the deadly pit,
from the miry clay.
He set my feet upon a rock
and made my footsteps firm.
He put a new song into my mouth, [a song of]
praise of our God.

⁷¹⁷ McGuckin (2001), p. 71.

He repeated all these verses three times, tapping me on the chest, as I said. Then he departed. And immediately light flooded my mind and there was joy in my heart with comfort and sweetness. I was a different man.⁷¹⁸

As the above words suggest, Dorotheus was deeply aware of the physical dimension of inner prayer. For him, as for so many of his predecessors, whether Greek, Egyptian, or Syrian, the presence of Divinity manifested itself on a somatic, tangible level. Like many of his predecessors, Dorotheus was also deeply aware of the inherently relational setting of the interior glorification of God. Communal existence was the testing ground of a person's love, faith, and endurance.⁷¹⁹ Rather than being a hindrance to the quest for God, the communal aspect of the mystical life was one of its most important features. By expressing love for the neighbor, Christians found rest in the heart, deepened their relationship with God, and guided fellow-beings toward greater intimacy with the divine sphere:

If we are one body each is a member of the other. . . . Let each one give assistance to the body according to his ability and take care to help one another, whether it is a matter of teaching and putting the word of God into the heart of a brother, or of consoling him in time of trouble or of giving a hand with work and helping him. In a word, as I was saying, each one according to his means should take care to be at one with everyone else, for the more one is united to his neighbor the more he is united to God.⁷²⁰

The above inquiry into the mystical teachings of the early Christian desert tradition, while cursory, has hopefully indicated some of the ways in which these teachings contributed to the shaping of the prayer of the heart. The earliest Egyptian

⁷¹⁸ Dorotheus of Gaza, *Disc 5*, in *Dorotheus of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), p. 128.

⁷¹⁹ McGuckin (2001), pp. 72-73.

⁷²⁰ Dorotheus of Gaza, *Disc 6*, in Wheeler (1977), p. 138.

desert fathers are of particular renown for emphasizing the need to watch over the heart so as to protect this interior region against distracting thoughts and distorted passions.

The later spiritual elders of the desert, for their part, are of great interest for advocating the uniform invocation of the Lord's name and, by doing so, for disseminating the Jesus Prayer. For them, the recitation of this prayer was the quintessential means of expressing their sorrow over past sins and of appealing for divine mercy. It was the quintessential means of moving beyond the clamor of demonic voices and of entering a state of stillness in which God's inner presence could be discerned. The Jesus Prayer allowed mystical seekers to remember God at all times and to transform their hearts into divine temples. The somatic dimension with which theologians of the desert tradition endowed the practice of inner prayer accelerated this process and insured that this form of prayer never lost its essentially embodied character. The intermarriage of the physical, deeply practical orientation of their teaching with the holistic outlook of Greek and Syrian mystical thought established the Jesus Prayer as a powerful means of worshipping God in a truly integral fashion.

Today, the Jesus Prayer is frequently regarded as synonymous with the prayer of the heart, and, no doubt, it is the most widely known expression of this ancient practice. Let us note, however, that, strictly speaking, the Jesus Prayer is compatible with the latter tradition only after prayer has ceased to be uttered aloud and only after the mind has been pulled down into the heart. Individuals engage in genuine prayer of the heart once the initial stages of oral and mental prayer have given way to a state in which prayer is offered from their deepest selves. At this point, prayer is self-acting and speaks itself

within the practitioner.⁷²¹ Prayer has become interiorized to such a degree as to be uttered by Jesus who resides in the temple of the heart rather than by the individual.⁷²² The Jesus Prayer and the prayer of the heart, although alike in many aspects of their teaching, are thus not identical. While the Jesus Prayer is an essential part of the doctrine of the prayer of the heart, it fails to capture fully the depth, complexity, and richness of the latter tradition.

⁷²¹ Ware (1974), p. 17.

⁷²² Ware (1974), p. 17.

The Medieval Hesychasts

The desert tradition, while alike to the Greek and Syrian traditions in many respects, distinguishes itself from these largely by discussing the nature of monologistic prayer and by proposing that the uniform invocation of the Lord's name become the primary means of entering into deep, transformative relations with God. The prominence that Egyptian theologians, especially theologians of the later generations, placed on the Jesus Prayer and its somatic techniques shaped subsequent mystical thought to a decisive degree. Foremost among the propagators of this aspect of the prayer of the heart were the medieval hesychasts. For them, as for their Egyptian predecessors, the continuous recitation of the holy name was an essential means of experiencing the direct presence of Divinity and of perceiving the pouring in of divine grace on a visceral, heart-felt level. Mystical theologians of the Byzantine era were convinced that the ongoing implementation of doctrines articulated by their Greek and Syrian ancestors as well as close adherence to Egyptian teachings on the Jesus Prayer were the cornerstone of intimate relations with the divine sphere. To elucidate the degree to which the hesychasts of medieval Byzantium drew on earlier ascetical traditions to articulate their doctrine on inner prayer, we will now consider three prominent theologians of this era, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory of Sinai, and Gregory Palamas. Since the objective is not to explore their teaching in any depth but rather to point to instances in which its debt to early Christian mystical thought is particularly pronounced, this will be but a brief discussion.

Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) entered the monastic life after experiencing overwhelming visions of light and seeing the radiance of Christ directly.⁷²³ This biographical note addresses a major feature of his mystical teaching. For Symeon, the direct, personal experience of God was of the utmost importance. He insisted that only people who have experienced the vision of light are qualified to teach and to guide novices along the mystical path. "Knowledge," he argued, "is not the light! Rather, it is the light that is knowledge."⁷²⁴ And yet, he pointed out, "we shamelessly presume to teach the multitude about the light of knowledge, and even to show them the light of knowledge itself!"⁷²⁵

Symeon's emphasis on the direct experience of Divinity and his proposition that the deifying union with God is characterized by radiant light is strongly reminiscent of early Christian teachings we have considered throughout this study. We cannot but be reminded of the many instances in which Greek, Syrian, and, given our brief prior discussion, Egyptian ascetics of the ancient church subordinated the intellectual inquiry into the nature of Divinity to its visceral perception. We cannot fail to be reminded of the many early Christian references to the divine-human encounter in terms of a luminous experience, a teaching we are likely to associate with Macarius's theology of light in particular.

A further feature that is prominent in Symeon's mystical doctrine and that recalls earlier teachings is his emphasis on the passionate nature of the divine-human

⁷²³ McGuckin (2001), p. 110.

⁷²⁴ Symeon the New Theologian, *Disc 28.7*, in *Symeon the New Theologian: The Discourses*, trans. C. J. deCatanzaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 301.

⁷²⁵ Symeon the New Theologian, *Disc 28.7*, in deCatanzaro (1980), p. 301.

relationship. Symeon's devotion to Christ as the soul's mentor and constant companion was pronounced. Christ, he proposed, serves as guide to all Christians who have turned their backs on sin and yearn for divine intimacy. Symeon writes:

Let us all from now on seek Him, who alone is capable of freeing us from our shackles!
And let us eagerly desire Him, whose beauty fills all thoughts and every heart
with wonder, wounds all souls and wings them towards love.
It attaches and unites them with God forever.
Yes, my brothers, run by means of your actions towards Him,
yes, my friends, stand up, yes, do not be outstripped.⁷²⁶

Symeon's emphasis on the soul's deep longing for intimate contact with Christ lends his teaching a distinctly heart-centered approach. For him, the heart is at the very center of the encounter with Divinity. Here, the latter manifests itself and takes up permanent residence. The heart is the site of the interior liturgical celebration. From the heart emanates the glory of God:

In amazement, I admire the splendor of His beauty,
and how, having opened the heavens, the Creator inclined
and showed me His glory, indescribable, marvelous.
And so who would draw nearer to Him?
Or how would he be carried away towards measureless heights?
While I reflect on this, He Himself is discovered within myself,
resplendent in the interior of my miserable heart,
illuminating me on all sides with His immortal splendor,
completely intertwined with me, He embraces me totally.⁷²⁷

For Symeon, as for early Christian ascetics, the church and the believer, the exterior altar and the heart reflect each other.⁷²⁸ Ultimately, they are one and the same. If the church serves as the temple of the Lord, so does the individual Christian, the tabernacle of Christ. If Christ is made present to the liturgical assembly during the celebration of the Eucharist, he manifests himself equally in the hearts of the faithful. The

⁷²⁶ Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns* 27, in Maloney (1976), pp. 144-145.

⁷²⁷ Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns* 16, in Maloney (1976), p. 58.

⁷²⁸ Alexander Golitzin, "The Body of Christ: Saint Symeon the New Theologian on Spiritual Life and the Hierarchical Church," a lecture given at the International Conference on St. Symeon the New Theologian at Bose, September 2002, <http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/symeon.html>, p. 4.

physical as well as the spiritual temple allow for a person's gradual assimilation to Christ and oneness with God.

Symeon's discussion of the temple motif is of great interest not only for heralding its interiorization. His profound devotion to the Eucharist and to the belief that the reception of the body and blood of Christ leads to the full absorption of Christians into the presence of their Savior suggests that his mystical doctrine was deeply holistic in outlook. For Symeon, participation in the Eucharistic rite implied the mingling of our own flesh with the body of Christ.⁷²⁹ The assimilation to the latter was a truly transformative experience and affected every aspect of human existence, including the physical:

How have You clothed me with the brilliant garment,
vivid with the splendor of immortality,
which changes all my members into light?
.....
I am beyond myself thinking
what I was, what I have become—O marvel!
I am attentive, I experience within me a respect,
a reverence, a fear, as if in Your presence,
and I do not know what to do, having become all timid;
where to sit down, whom to approach
and where to place these members which are Yours.⁷³⁰

In his deep regard for the human body, Symeon mirrored the teaching of many early Christians. Like them, he viewed the body as the site of theophany and as the temple of God. Like them, he looked to embodied existence as a vital tool of mystical ascent. With Symeon, we encounter a theologian who believed that all of human nature is transfigured and radiates with the glory of God, for "the soul, when dispassionate, sanctifies the body with its own luminosity and with the radiance of the Holy Spirit."⁷³¹

⁷²⁹ McGuckin (2001), pp. 116-117.

⁷³⁰ Symeon the New Theologian, *Hymns* 2, in Maloney (1976), p. 17.

⁷³¹ Symeon the New Theologian, *PT* 58, in *Philokalia* 4, trans. by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 36.

Like many of his predecessors, Symeon also believed in the relational nature of Christian existence. On the one hand, this feature is exemplified by the liturgical orientation of his mystical doctrine. For Symeon, mystical theology and ecclesial theology were interwoven. By joining the fellowship of the mystery and by partaking of the Eucharist, Christians embarked on a life of active service and communal outreach designed to facilitate the direct encounter with God.

The relational nature of Symeon's theology is further emphasized by his insistence on the need for a spiritual guide. The eleventh century monk did not believe that the quest for God can be undertaken in isolation and looked to the spiritual elder as an important companion throughout the arduous quest for divine intimacy. Spiritual guides held multiple functions and served as physicians, counselors, intercessors, mediators, and sponsors to the soul.⁷³² As physicians, they cared for the soul that had fallen ill and nurtured it back to health. As teachers, they suggested appropriate ways of repentance and purification. Through prayer, spiritual elders mediated between their charges and God, hoping thereby to introduce the former to divine life. For Symeon, as for all church fathers examined in this study, spiritual development depended on the guidance and mediating activity of Christians further advanced along the mystical path. Individuals who had experienced the vision of radiant glory directly were in a unique position to sensitize religious aspirants to expressions of divine life in themselves, in fellow-beings, and in the world at large.

These brief comments on key elements of Symeon's mystical doctrine have hopefully shown that the Byzantine theologian drew on many early Christian ascetical

⁷³² Irénée Hausherr, *Spiritual Direction in the Early Christian East* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cisterican Publications, 1990), p. xii.

teachings to present a theology that was experiential, heart-centered, and holistic in approach. In many respects, Symeon was deeply indebted to Origen and Evagrius. He adopted their triadic outline of the mystical path and viewed the progressive purification, illumination, and perfection of a person's innermost self as the quintessential means of drawing into the presence of God. Symeon believed that only the person who had won the Christian battle against demonic thoughts and wayward impulses could enter a state of inner stillness and restore the soul's divine image to its original splendor. But Symeon was no less indebted to Christianity's Syrian heritage. In his emphasis on the need for purity of heart, on God's movement to take command of our deepest selves, and on the radiant nature of the encounter with Divinity, Symeon drew on elements particularly pronounced in the mystical thought of this early Christian tradition. He paid tribute to the ascetical teaching of the ancient Syrian church also by emphasizing the affective, passionate nature of the divine-human encounter, although we should not forget that Origen's description of the soul's union with Divinity was every bit as passionate. Symeon's focus on purity of heart and on the need to pay close attention to the physical movement of the heart while praying also suggests familiarity with the teachings of the desert tradition. Likewise reminiscent of Egyptian teachings is his understanding of prayer as the continual remembrance and invocation of the Lord.⁷³³

Symeon's mystical teaching proved to be deeply influential and became a constitutive part of later Athonite monasticism. It prepared the way for the full blossoming of the prayer of the heart in thirteenth and fourteenth century Byzantium.⁷³⁴ Symeon's ascetical doctrine guaranteed that his hesychast successors would be ever

⁷³³ Symeon the New Theologian, *PT* 140, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 56.

⁷³⁴ McGuckin (2001), p. 117.

committed to the experiential encounter with God and articulate a teaching meant to guide Christians toward divine union without excluding either the body or the community from this transformative experience. At the forefront of these theologians was Gregory of Sinai (c. 1255-1346), a hesychast who presented an ascetical doctrine that was unprecedented in its emphasis on the physical dimension of inner prayer. Let us take a moment to consider prominent features of this teaching.

Reminiscent of Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory of Sinai looked to the mystical theology of his early Christian predecessors to develop a doctrine on the soul's deifying union with God. This doctrine was characterized by a deep belief in prayer as an interior liturgy celebrated in the sanctuary of the heart. For Gregory, prayer was a means of offering up "the Lamb of God upon the altar of the soul."⁷³⁵ Prayer was "a joyous fire kindled in the heart."⁷³⁶ It was "a vigorous sweet-scented light."⁷³⁷ If Gregory's association of prayer with the heart, with light, and with fire suggests Syrian influences, his characterization of prayer in term of "the noetic activity of the intellect"⁷³⁸ and of "the origin of true and absolute Wisdom"⁷³⁹ bears witness to his familiarity with Greek Christian terminology. Like Symeon, but also like his ancestors Dionysius and Maximus, Gregory articulated his teaching on the luminous encounter with God in the human heart by drawing on philosophical as well as biblical language.

Gregory looked to the ascetical theology of his early Christian predecessors also to present his views on the body and its vital role in the soul's progressive transformation.

⁷³⁵ Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 112, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.

⁷³⁶ Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 113, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.

⁷³⁷ Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 113, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.

⁷³⁸ Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 113, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.

⁷³⁹ Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 113, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 237.

Ever committed to the holistic conception of human nature, he sought to draw attention to the physical dimension of the mystical life and the innate unity of the material and the spiritual by suggesting that the words uttered in prayer be correlated with the movement of the breath. In his emphasis on the usage of specific somatic techniques, he was especially indebted to the teaching of the Egyptian desert fathers. Like John Climacus and Hesychius, Gregory advised his audience to “let mindfulness of Jesus be united to your breathing, and then you will know the blessings of stillness.”⁷⁴⁰ As a further means of heightening practitioners’ sense of the body and its vital role in the facilitation of divine intimacy, Gregory suggested that they pay careful attention to the physical beat of the heart and conceive of it as a metronome, keeping time in parallel with the breath and the silent words of prayer.⁷⁴¹

For Gregory, awareness of the breath and the heart beat during prayer was one important means of keeping a person’s attention focused on God and of bringing about the heart’s progressive purification and illumination. The Byzantine hesychast took the idea that a person’s assimilation to Christ is not merely a matter of spiritual transfiguration but involves the physical dimension of human existence to further heights by advocating that practitioners adopt a specific physical posture during prayer. By sitting on a seat about nine inches high and tucking the head into the chest, Gregory believed that practitioners of inner prayer were capable of drawing the intellect down into the heart and of quieting the clamor of demonic voices.⁷⁴² The posture of the body helped the mind to extricate itself from the countless teeming thoughts by which it was afflicted and to enter a state of stillness in which God’s inner presence could be discerned. For Gregory,

⁷⁴⁰ Gregory of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 3, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 265.

⁷⁴¹ McGuckin (2001), p. 118.

⁷⁴² Gregory of Sinai, *Watchfulness* 2, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 264.

something as seemingly inconsequential as physical posture had a profound effect on a person's spiritual state and opened the path to a greater dimension of reality.

By synthesizing the mystical doctrine of his ancestors and deepening its body-centered outlook, Gregory contributed significantly to the shaping and flowering of the prayer of the heart. His teaching on the use of somatic tools, tools which were first introduced by the desert fathers and which Gregory embraced whole-heartedly, proved to be of lasting influence. The second prominent founder of hesychasm and synthesizer of earlier Christian mystical teachings was Gregory Palamas (c. 1296-1359), a priest, theologian, and important defender of the Athonite monastic tradition. Gregory was the most theological of the hesychast founding fathers,⁷⁴³ and, as we will see in the upcoming brief elucidation of his doctrine, featured prominently in the attempt to provide hesychasm with a substantial theological underpinning.

A true disciple of his early Christian forefathers, Gregory placed great emphasis on experiential knowledge of God in prayer. He harbored a deep belief that, even in this age, humans can participate, through prayer, in the divine mysteries and the angelic liturgy.⁷⁴⁴ In unison with his ancestors and with Dionysius in particular, Gregory insisted on God's utter incomprehensibility. For him, the immediate perception of God remained, at heart, a mystery. While Gregory believed humans capable of experiencing direct

⁷⁴³ McGuckin (2001), p. 123.

⁷⁴⁴ Gregory Palamas, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science and on the Moral and Ascetical Life: One Hundred and Fifty Texts* 76, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 381.

contact with Divinity by means of its energies, he argued that its essence remains forever hidden.⁷⁴⁵

Like Symeon and Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas was a skillful synthesizer of Christianity's mystical legacies. One occasion on which his ability to combine elements of the Greek and the Syrian Christian strands becomes apparent is his anthropological teaching. Drawing on the Origenian notion of the *nous* as well as on biblical heart language, Gregory proposed that humans effect their progressive deification by pulling the *nous* down into the heart. If the mind returns to itself, that is, if it escapes the grips of passion and focuses all of its attention on Divinity,⁷⁴⁶ it is able to journey back to the heart, to discover therein the inner image of God, and to make this interior region its true home. The ability of the intellect to nestle in the heart, Gregory suggested, allows Christians to experience divine grace viscerally and to enter the "sacred kingdom of love."⁷⁴⁷ For him, the *nous* and the heart were intimately linked. Both were essential to the luminous encounter with God.

If Gregory drew on both strands of ancient mystical thought to elucidate aspects of his anthropological teaching, he did so also in his teaching on the soul's ascent into the presence of God. Distinct Origenian and Evagrian influences can be detected in his emphasis on the necessity to combat the *logismoi* and the uncontrollable desires they evoke. Greek Christian doctrine also guided his views on the virtuous life and on the attainment of dispassion. The following words, in which Gregory addresses the inner state

⁷⁴⁵ Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 3.2.5-15, in *Gregory Palamas: The Triads*, trans. Nicholas Gendle (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 93-111.

⁷⁴⁶ Gregory Palamas, *Three Texts on Prayer and Purity of Heart* 2, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 343.

⁷⁴⁷ Gregory Palamas, *Treatise on the Spiritual Life* 6, 11, in *Gregory Palamas: Treatise on the Spiritual Life*, trans. Daniel M. Rogich (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1995), p. 53, n. 90, p. 85.

of the hesychast who has entered the stage of illumination, reveal the extent of his debt to the noetic mystical strand and its doctrine of the soul's triadic progression:

This gives birth to a godlike, unmatched and stable state of virtue as well as to a disposition that has no or little inclination to sin. It is then that the intellect is illuminated by the divine Logos who enables it to perceive clearly the inner essences—the *logoi*—of created things and on account of its purity reveals to it the mysteries of nature. In this way, through relationships of correspondence the perceiving and trusting intelligence is raised up to the apprehension of supranatural realities, an apprehension that the Father of the Logos communicates through an immaterial union.⁷⁴⁸

Gregory's reference in the above citation to the progressive illumination of the intellect and to its ability to discern ever more clearly the archetypal reality of the universe vividly calls to mind the mystical teaching of Origen and Evagrius. Other Gregorian passages have a distinctly Syrian tenor and display a deep commitment to biblical teaching:

If, as the Psalmist says, 'All the glory of the king's daughter is within' (Ps. 45:13 LXX), how shall we seek it somewhere without? And if, as St Paul says, 'God has sent forth His Spirit into our hearts, crying: "Abba Father"' (cf. Gal. 4:6), how shall we not pray in union with the Spirit that is in our hearts? . . . 'An upright heart', says Solomon, 'seeks conscious awareness' (cf. Prov. 27:21 LXX), the awareness or perception which he elsewhere calls noetic and divine (cf. Prov. 2:5 LXX).⁷⁴⁹

These examples, while brief, allow us to observe Gregory's loyalty to the philosophical as well as the biblical heritage of Christianity's mystical tradition. In some instances, he looked to Greek terminology to present his teaching on the soul's ascent into the presence of God. On other occasions, he favored biblical heart language. Like so many of his predecessors, Gregory proposed that both sets of teaching were complementary and that their respective vocabulary could be used interchangeably. For him, noetic and heart-centered language pointed toward the same divine reality.

⁷⁴⁸ Gregory Palamas, *To the Most Revered Nun Xenia* 62, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 318.

⁷⁴⁹ Gregory Palamas, *In Defense of Those who Devoutly Practise a Life of Stillness* 4, in *Philokalia* 4, p. 335.

Reference to the illuminated intellect as well as to the upright heart suggested an inner transformative process that culminated in deification and oneness with God.

Gregory's loyalty to the mystical legacies of the ancient church does not end here. Like Christian theologians of the Greek and Syriac speaking world, he adopted a distinctly pro-body stance. Taking the incarnation as his starting point and hailing its life-giving properties, Gregory insisted that the Christ-event allowed for the transfiguration of the whole person, body and soul. The soul "uses as an instrument the body, which by nature co-exists with it."⁷⁵⁰ For Gregory, the body was never an inherent evil. Through its enfleshment, the Logos established a new relation with creation and gave all matter, including the body, a new potential as vehicle of the Spirit. Revitalized by the latter, the body was able to conform to its model, the incarnate Christ, and to become a supple instrument of spiritual advancement.⁷⁵¹ While Gregory agreed with his predecessors that matter is not compatible with the essence of the mind, he proposed that its corruptibility and composite nature can be overcome once it "truly begins to live, having acquired a form of life conformable to the union with Christ."⁷⁵²

Gregory's insistence on the value of the body is emphasized further by his vigorous defense of the use of somatic techniques during prayer, especially techniques advocated by Gregory of Sinai in accordance with the teachings of the Egyptian desert fathers. A staunch supporter of the Jesus Prayer, Gregory Palamas was convinced that the adoption of a particular physical posture that allowed practitioners to focus their eyes on

⁷⁵⁰ Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 1.2.3, in Gendle (1983), p. 42.

⁷⁵¹ Gendle (1983), p. 126, n. 48.

⁷⁵² Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 1.2.6, in Gendle (1983), p. 45.

the inner place of the heart and to control their breathing was an important means of seeing the light of Divinity.⁷⁵³

If Gregory was committed to the holistic conception of human existence, he was as committed to its relational nature. The existence of the hesychast, he argued, was always rooted in the here and now. The hesychast worked “for the life of the world.”⁷⁵⁴ Like early Christian ascetics, Gregory looked to involvement in the church and its community as a vital tool of entering into direct contact with God. If Christians “force themselves to use the things of this world in conformity with the commandments of God,”⁷⁵⁵ he believed that they were able to turn their backs on evil and to enter a state of impassibility that engenders love for the unique Good.⁷⁵⁶ For him, charitable conduct and the fervent endeavor to do the divine will in the world was an important means of offering to God a living sacrifice and of effecting the heart’s transformation into a divine temple. In his synthesis of earlier teachings, Gregory was ever loyal to the early Christian notion of the mystic as an individual committed to the quest for God within an embodied, relational context.

With these comments, we conclude this cursory overview of the early Christian desert tradition and of medieval hesychasm. By looking back to the Egyptian desert and forward to the Byzantine Empire, we were able to observe how the intermarriage of Greek and Syrian ascetical doctrines shaped the teaching of both traditions. The desert fathers as well as the founders of hesychasm drew on philosophical constructs as well as

⁷⁵³ McGuckin (2001), p. 125.

⁷⁵⁴ Rogich (1995), p. 85, n. 156.

⁷⁵⁵ Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 2.2.20, in Gendle (1983), p. 55.

⁷⁵⁶ Gregory Palamas, *Tr* 2.2.20, in Gendle (1983), p. 55.

biblical heart language to describe how humans might be united with God in a direct, experiential manner. By considering teachings of early Christian Egyptian and of the later Byzantine era, we were also able to observe the particular importance representatives of both traditions accorded to the invocation of the holy name. First implemented in the Egyptian desert, the Jesus Prayer rose to prominence in medieval Byzantium where it was vigorously defended. For members of both traditions, this expression of the prayer of the heart was viewed as the quintessential means of entering into direct contact with Divinity. The Jesus Prayer and its accompanying somatic techniques allowed ascetics to focus all of their attention on God and to pass from human fragmentation to divine wholeness.

Let us now turn our attention to the conclusion of this study. After summarizing its salient findings, we will look beyond the medieval Byzantine period to our own time and consider the relevance of the prayer of the heart to contemporary Christians.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

In our discussion of the prayer of the heart, its origins, its salient features, and its development, we have traveled far. We began with an inquiry into biblical anthropology and the views of ancient Israel on the heart and came to see that the Hebraic notion of the pure, gentle, and open heart guided the mystical theology of the early church to a decisive degree. Its theologians knew that direct communion with God depended on our ability to empty the heart of all evil and to bring our thoughts, feelings, wishes, and actions into accord with the divine will. Like their Jewish ancestors, early Christians looked to the heart as a symbol of personal and cosmic unity. It joined body and soul, the material and immaterial, the created and uncreated. For them, no less than for their predecessors, the heart was at the center of an anthropological teaching that emphasized the holistic nature of human existence.

Next, we saw that the Hebraic conception of the heart was taken to further heights in the New Testament. Paul, in particular, looked to the heart as the meeting-place between God and humans and as the new spiritual temple. He proposed that a heart purified by faith becomes a sacrificial site from which the devout offer to God their pure selves. If Christians are open to the guidance of Christ and the Spirit, they may witness the transformation of this inner realm into a vessel of divine indwelling and glorification.

The inquiry into the notion of the heart in the Old and New Testament allowed us to turn to the discussion of Aphrahat's doctrine of inner prayer with a clearer sense of its

source of inspiration. Aphrahat was deeply committed to the scriptural notion of the pure heart and to the rendition of this inner faculty in terms of the supreme symbol of our spiritual condition. For Aphrahat, as for the authors of the New Testament, the inner glorification of God was a pressing matter, and he emphasized this feature by presenting silent prayer as a spiritual sacrifice that is offered from the temple of the heart. Aphrahat envisioned the heart as a liturgical site onto which the fire of Divinity descends in much the same way in which the Holy Spirit descends onto the elements at the moment of consecration.

Of particular interest in our discussion of Aphrahat was the idea that the Syrian father did not view the interiorization of the temple motif as an invitation to sunder relations with the church and the surrounding world. As we had occasion to witness, Aphrahat was profoundly aware of the communal nature of the mystical life. For him, purity of heart, inner prayer, and social philanthropy were one and the same. The form of prayer most pleasing to God was the act of reaching out to fellow-beings with compassion and love. We saw that, in many respects, Aphrahat's teaching exemplifies the notion that humans come to know God through the other. The relational context of human existence propels individuals to consider their lives and their condition to a degree an isolated existence does not. It sets in motion a process of inner growth that calls for the exploration of their deepest self. By committing to this exploration, they can, in time, discover the abiding presence of Divinity in their hearts. Humans seek fellow-beings to know themselves and, by knowing themselves, to know God.

If the discussion of Aphrahat brought to the fore the idea that the life of inner prayer is inextricably linked to the cultivation of interpersonal relationships and social philanthropy, the elucidation of Ephrem's writings provided us with the opportunity to

consider in greater detail the vital role theologians of the early church accorded to the body in the mystical quest. We saw that the imitation of Christ's many charitable deeds depends on embodied existence. The body allows us to be present to the world. It is the means by which the soul makes its wishes known to fellow-beings. To the same degree to which the assumption of a human body allowed Divinity to manifest itself to the created order, the soul depends on the body to manifest its intentions to the phenomenological world. For Ephrem, the body was the soul's loyal companion and the primary means of revealing to the world the reality of the immaterial realm. For him, it was also the primary means of sensing God's presence and of discerning the wholly Transcendent, Unknowable, and Ineffable. The body's sensory awareness allowed humans to reach beyond the limitations of the intellect and to experience God on an intuitive, visceral level. Although Ephrem viewed the body as less elevated in nature than the soul and the spirit, he deemed it an essential part of the divine mountain.

The emphasis of early Christians, such as Aphrahat and Ephrem, on charitable conduct and on the body as a vital tool of the mystical quest was taken to heart by their successor Macarius. As we had occasion to witness, Macarius was deeply committed to the relational and embodied nature of the ascetical life and conveyed this sentiment by employing a heart-centered language. For Macarius, the notion of the heart implied a whole series of interconnected levels. In the heart, the communion between humans became a distinct possibility. So, too, did the communion of body and soul and of the created and uncreated order. The pure heart was so open and spacious as to allow Christ to set up his kingdom therein and to invite into it all of his angels and spirits. This movement of Divinity to take command of the heart presented humans with a very tangible experience of God's presence and placed the divine-human encounter within a

deeply experiential frame of reference. Like Aphrahat and Ephrem, Macarius embraced a truly holistic conception of human nature.

In our discussion of Macarius, we also got a first sense of the fact that the two traditions of early Christian mystical thought, the Hellenic and the Syrian tradition, were not incompatible. Although Macarius's interest in the liturgical rendering of inner prayer and his vivid use of heart imagery placed his teaching within the sphere of Christianity's Semitic heritage, aspects of its Greek philosophical background were not absent from his corpus. If Macarius's teaching on the light-filled encounter with God in the spiritual temple of the heart shaped the doctrine of the prayer of the heart to a decisive degree, so did his openness to the intermarriage of elements taken from seemingly disparate mystical teachings. Macarius was not adverse to the incorporation of Platonic features into his ascetical doctrine. The lasting influence of the prayer of the heart owes much to his ability to draw on Christianity's philosophical as well as biblical legacy.

The Macarian corpus introduced us to the possibility of joining elements of the Hellenic and Semitic strands of Christian mystical thought. The intermarriage of these strands was a matter of ongoing discussion in the ensuing consideration of Origen's œuvre. It became apparent that features commonly associated with the Syrian ascetical tradition were present also in the works of the Alexandrian theologian and that the two sets of Christian teaching complement rather than oppose one another.

The biblical concepts of the pure heart and of the heart as a symbol of personal unity were integral to Origen's ascetical doctrine. So, too, was the notion of the heart as a spiritual temple. Despite Origen's tendency to draw on abstract Greek philosophical terminology to articulate his mystical teaching, he infused his teaching with a heart-felt devotion to the personalized Logos and insisted that the inner discernment of God was

never a matter of theoretical speculation but called for the experiential participation in the Christian message. Like the biblically inspired writings of Syrian ascetics, Origen's œuvre champions the idea that religious seekers place themselves body and soul in the hands of their personal Savior. Origen insisted that perfection depended on the soul's burning love for its heavenly Bridegroom and on the ardent longing to be introduced to divine life. To convey the all-consuming, passionate nature of the mystical quest, the holistic principle of the heart provided him with a powerful image. It brought to the fore the fact that lasting peace could be attained only by experiencing God viscerally. By resorting to the holistic biblical tradition of the heart, Origen was able to bring to the fore the fact that, for him, as for his Syrian successors, the quest for God was inextricably linked to embodied, relational existence.

In our discussion of Origen's corpus, we not only had occasion to witness his debt to the biblical concept of the heart and its use to convey the experiential nature of the quest for God. We were also able to establish that Origen's philosophical learnedness provided him with the means of placing his heart-felt Jesus mysticism within a framework conducive to the detailed exploration of a person's intrapsychic landscape. Knowledge of Greek philosophy and its vocabulary allowed Origen to describe the many facets of human existence in great detail. It allowed him to indicate how inner reintegration might facilitate the experiential encounter with God. Origen's intellectual astuteness provided posterity with a mystical teaching that had a sound theoretical underpinning and a heart-felt, holistic core.

The examination of Evagrius's ascetical doctrine reintroduced many features previously discussed in the exploration of Origen's work. Attention was drawn to the fact that notions, such as the notion of purity of heart (*apatheia*), of the heart as a place of

self-transcendence and the site of the inner liturgical celebration, and of the mystical life as an inherently embodied, communal venture, commonly associated with the Syrian mystical strand were no less integral to the work of Evagrius, a major representative of the Hellenic Christian mystical strand. While Evagrius, like Origen, was more likely to articulate his teaching by drawing on Greek terminology, his mystical doctrine derived from heart-felt, personal experience and reflected the belief that the quest for perfection was inseparably linked to the daily, very practical involvement in the trials of human existence. Like his Syrian contemporaries, Evagrius imbued his writings with an intimate, emotive quality and never wavered in his commitment to the intuitive perception of God beyond intellectual knowledge.

As was the case in our inquiry into Origen's ascetical doctrine, the examination of Evagrius's mystical teaching allowed us to observe that seemingly disparate elements of early Christian thought, in the right hands, could be reconciled with authority and ease. Evagrius's doctrine served as a prime example of a teaching on the mystical life that was systematic and philosophical as well as dynamic and biblical. In his attempt to indicate to fellow-monastics how to cultivate an existence that enabled them to discern the archetypal nature of existence and to draw closer to knowledge of God, Evagrius combined intellectual learnedness and deep devotion to the imitation of Christ. Like his mentor, Origen, he drew on the vocabulary of Greek thinkers to present a detailed and sophisticated map of intrapsychic reality. Christianity's Hellenic heritage provided him with the means of articulating the soul's progression toward perfection with an astonishing degree of detail and insight. It allowed him to identify and to devise concrete, practical guidelines on how to deepen the practice of inner prayer and, by doing so, on how to gain knowledge of God beyond concepts, images, and thoughts. Like Origen,

Evagrius did so without compromising his commitment to Scripture's holistic teaching and to the experiential perception of the divine presence.

We opened the chapter on the synthesis of the two early Christian mystical strands with a discussion of the writings of Dionysius, a theologian who was exceptionally adept at joining seemingly disparate teachings. We had the opportunity to witness that the sixth century theologian gracefully reconciled elements of Evagrian teaching with aspects of his own Syrian background. Evagrius's views on the passions, on the virtuous life, on *apatheia*, and on undistracted, imageless prayer had a distinct place in his mystical teaching as did the deeply liturgical conception of inner prayer so common to the theology of the early Syrian church.

But Dionysius should not merely be remembered as a skillful synthesizer, for, as we have seen, many of his predecessors had already begun the process of joining the two strands of Christian mystical thought. With regard to the shaping of the prayer of the heart, let us remember Dionysius also for further elucidating the Origenian notion of the soul's triadic mystical path, for presenting its return to oneness with God as an experience characterized by unfathomable darkness, and for placing love at the very center of the quest for God. For Dionysius, God's ecstatic love and the overflow of divine goodness were the source of all there is. Divine love was the driving force behind the deifying union with God and the very existence of the universe. The unifying power of love was also at the heart of his notion of hierarchy.

As we discovered, rather than envision hierarchy as something constraining and inherently divisive, Dionysius regarded the hierarchical arrangement of the created realm as the primary means of unifying human beings to one another, to the angels, and to God. The hierarchical order allowed for the mediation of divine love, light, and grace. It

reintroduced the soul to its inherent order and allowed for its progressive transformation into a divine temple. Dionysius's deep conviction that hierarchy is synonymous with relationality guaranteed that neither he nor later theologians who drew on his mystical doctrine would conceive of the quest for divine union in terms of an isolated, self-absorbed endeavor. The pursuit of the Christian life would always remain a communal affair and even deep absorption in inner prayer could not divorce a person from the neighbor. The celebration of the interior liturgy was no less relational than the external glorification of God.

Our discussion resumed with the exploration of Maximus, the early Byzantine theologian who provided a vital link between the mystical doctrine of early Christian ascetics and the hesychasts of the later Byzantine period. As we saw, Maximus's keen vision allowed him to draw on Greek as well as Syrian Christian teachings to articulate a mystical doctrine that was based on the holistic biblical tradition of the heart and that exerted a lasting influence on subsequent generations of Christian seekers. By building on Origenian and Evagrian thought, Maximus provided the tradition of the prayer of the heart with a substantial anthropological frame of reference. He was able to indicate to religious aspirants how they might apply knowledge of their inner processes to the lived experience of the Christian life and progress along the path toward the deifying encounter with God. Maximus's mastery of earlier anthropological teachings allowed him to suggest to fellow-ascetics how they might effect their inner reintegration and work toward the healing of interpersonal and cosmic fragmentation.

We were also able to observe that Maximus was deeply committed to the heart language so pronounced in the writings of early Christian Syrian ascetics although, as has been pointed out repeatedly, such language was by no means absent from the works of

Origen and Evagrius. Despite his deep involvement in doctrinal matters, Maximus was a theologian who articulated a teaching that radiated warmth and devotion to the person of Christ. For him, the incarnation was of the greatest importance. It allowed humans to experience a deifying union with God and the sanctification of their bodies no less than their souls. It bore witness to the inherent goodness of creation. Maximus's deep belief in the salvific enfleshment of the Logos propelled him to articulate a mystical teaching that was greatly invested in corporeality and that looked to the visceral perception of Divinity in the human heart as the quintessential means of knowing God.

Given Maximus's interest in corporeality, he never conceived of inner prayer as an activity that invited the spiritualization of human nature at the expense of embodied, relational existence. If the internal celebration of the liturgy and its potential to usher in direct, unmediated communion with God did not negate the value of the body in the quest for divine union, it neither called into question the importance of the church and its inherently communal setting. For him, as for many of his predecessors, the celebration of the interior liturgy was a means of deepening rather than sundering interpersonal relations. The progressive purification and illumination of the heart through undistracted prayer allowed for greater self-knowledge. The exploration of inner depths and greater self-knowledge, in turn, enabled Christians to reconnect with the divine source of being and to experience its all-embracing love. Once they encountered Love in their hearts, human compassion flowed freely and naturally.

In the hope of providing as complete a picture of the prayer of the heart as possible, our discussion concluded with a chapter on two aspects of this doctrine hitherto not considered, the desert tradition and the medieval hesychast tradition. On the one hand, this inquiry allowed us to trace the influence of Greek and Syrian ascetical thought on

both legacies. At the same time, it provided us with the opportunity of paying close attention to one particular expression of the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, and to consider its origination in the Egyptian desert and rise to prominence in the later Byzantine era. The emphasis Egyptian and Byzantine mystical theologians placed on the somatic dimension of inner prayer also provided us with the opportunity of witnessing, once again, the deep regard our Christian ancestors harbored for the body and its potential to facilitate the soul's ascent into the presence of God.

With the above summary of salient findings in mind, let us now return to our initial discussion of the term 'mystical,' which was provided in the introduction of this study. Based on McGinn's working definition of mysticism as denoting beliefs and practices that are concerned with the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate presence of God, we established, at that point, that early Christian ascetics looked to the direct encounter with Divinity as an experience characterized by a deep sense of mystery. We saw that this sense of mystery did not arise from the fact that God and all things divine were kept secret but, rather, that it arose from the fact that the nature of Divinity remains, at heart, ineffable. While the mystery of God's love for humankind was revealed resoundingly in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, early Christians believed that it was of such a nature as to surpass anything the human mind can fathom.

This opening proposition has been confirmed throughout our discussion of individual theologians. We had occasion to observe that Evagrius, for instance, characterized the state of pure prayer in which God can be meditated directly as a state that transcends human constructs and images. Dionysius suggested that God is known in a

mysterious darkness of unknowing and championed the concept of apophaticism to convey the ineffable nature of God. All church fathers discussed in these pages believed that the infinite nature of Divinity prevents humans from ever grasping and describing its essence. For them, the mere proposition that the human mind might penetrate the veil of divine mystery and capture God's very being was inconceivable, for it implies that Divinity is finite and subject to limitation.

The early Christian emphasis on our inability to grasp God intellectually had far-reaching implications for the conception of the mystical life and the role it accords to the body. The realization that human intellectual powers are limited propelled ascetics of the ancient church to shift their focus of attention away from our rational faculties to the body as the primary means of apprehending Divinity. The body and its intuitive faculties became vital aides to the perception of God's inner presence. Visceral, participatory knowledge took precedence over theoretical inquiry. Teachers of inner prayer recognized the critical role of sensory experience in any human form of knowledge, including knowledge of God.⁷⁵⁷ They understood that bodily awareness provided them with the means of knowing that God is, even if they could never hope to know what God is.

The body was an essential tool of mystical ascent for yet another reason. Teachers of the ascetical life were deeply aware of the fact that the soul depended on the body to manifest its hidden longings. Taking as their point of reference the incarnation, they knew that just as Divinity had need of a physical presence to convey its deep love for humankind, so the soul needed the body to express its compassion and goodwill. The immaterial could not make its presence felt without manifesting itself on a physical level. To shape the phenomenological world and to mediate between all that had been sundered,

⁷⁵⁷ Ashbrook Harvey (2006), p. 171.

the spiritual had need of a tangible presence. The body alone allowed humans to reach out to fellow-beings and to alleviate their suffering. It alone provided the means of effecting the rest of God.

For our early Christian ancestors, the body was the humble yet persistent mentor of the proud soul. Within this capacity, it provided religious aspirants with ever new challenges to confront and with limitations to overcome. Theologians of the ancient church were well aware of the fact that the transformation of the human heart into a place of divine indwelling depended on a person's ability to face and master the trials of embodied existence. Only by heeding and learning from the trying lessons of such an existence could they hope to taste, in the here and now, the sweetness of the life to come. The huge labor and reward of the mystical life happened because the body could never be abandoned.⁷⁵⁸

In our discussion of the early Christian conception of the mystical life, the body-centered approach of this conception is one all-important point to note. Unlike the commonly held and rather clichéd assumption that ascetics of the ancient church strove for communion with God by becoming excessively spiritualized and negating their embodied existence, the writings of the church fathers examined in this study suggest quite the opposite. They suggest that the body was considered an asset rather than a hindrance to union with Divinity, a viewpoint that impelled ascetics of the Egyptian desert in particular to look to somatic techniques as a powerful means of facilitating stillness of mind and deep absorption in God. While the body could be prone to debilitating instinctual urges and wont to manifest these in untoward actions which separated humans from the heavenly sphere, the body itself was never held responsible

⁷⁵⁸ Brown (1988), p. 237.

for these fatal flaws. Ascetics rather looked to the mind as the cause of evil, for it was here that inflammatory thoughts instilled by demonic forces took root, pervaded the body, and prevented the continuous remembrance of God.

In our discussion of the late ancient understanding of the mystical life, we paid close attention to yet another prominent feature. Once again contrary to common belief, we were able to observe that the mysterious, intensely personal encounter with God was at all times placed within a relational context and hinged on participation in the fellowship of the mystery, the church. Ascetical teachers were convinced that the mystery of God's love could not be experienced apart from the church, its liturgy, and its community. While the celebration of the interior liturgy of the heart provided Christians with the unique opportunity of entering into direct contact with Divinity, theologians of the early church knew that the divine-human encounter depended on neighborly relations and charitable deeds. They insisted that inner prayer and social philanthropy were but two sides of the same coin. Both were to be practiced in conjunction. For our Christian ancestors, the idea that humans exist in interdependence and that all life unfolds in response to social encounters and interpersonal relationships was a given. They believed that relationships with fellow-beings were the primary means by which humans could come to understand themselves and, by coming to understand themselves, acquire knowledge of the divine life that resided at the root of their being. Social interactions and exchanges were a vital means of experiencing Divinity as it manifested itself in and through fellow-humans. By detecting God-like attributes in the neighbor and the created order, early Christian theologians believed that humans were provided with ever new

opportunities of detecting the all-pervasive presence of Divinity, not least within themselves, and of manifesting divine love and glory continuously to fellow-beings.

The idea that a life spent in inner prayer goes hand in hand with active involvement in communal affairs may come as a surprise to modern readers who are wont to conceive of the mystic as a person who, in pursuit of the subjective experience of God, withdraws into isolation and possibly even into self-absorption. The present study has attempted to rectify this misconception by examining primary sources which suggest that their authors sought direct contact with God by engaging ever more fully in day-to-day, practical existence. The attempt has been made to show that early Christian ascetics looked to the daily pursuit of active service as a vital tool of facilitating closeness with God. By learning to relate more fully to fellow-beings and to extend a helping hand, members of the early church believed that it was possible to manifest, in the here and now, the inclusive and loving nature of the eschatological community. They believed that the ability to transcend strife and division was the hallmark of perfection and led to the deification of human nature.

The idea that the discernment of God's inner presence hinges on involvement in the local community and in the world at large introduces us to our final discussion which considers the question of how modern individuals might translate the ancient doctrine of the prayer of the heart into a present day, non-monastic context. As we have seen, theologians of the Byzantine period succeeded masterfully in transposing early Christian teaching into a medieval context. Does the transposition of this teaching into a twenty-first century setting promise to be equally successful? Can contemporary Christians living

in the world hope to discern God's inner presence despite the much altered circumstances of modern day existence?

Given the emphasis of early Christian ascetics on the embodied and relational nature of the mystical life, the doctrine of the prayer of the heart is in many respects uniquely suited to its transposition into a present day context. The belief of our Christian ancestors that love in action is the quintessential means of serving God, indeed, the suggestion by theologians, such as Aphrahat, that the reaching out to fellow-beings constitutes prayer itself almost begs for such a transposition. Furthermore, does not the very concept of prayer as an interior liturgy that can be celebrated in any place and at any time invite the reconceptualization of this ancient practice into a modern, non-monastic context?

To explore this matter, let us consider the views of several contemporary Orthodox theologians and take as our starting-point a revealing passage from the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. In it, reference is made to the advanced spiritual state of a doctor, a layman, who, even while living in the world, participates in the celebration of the angelic liturgy:

It was revealed to Abba Antony in the desert: "In the city there is one like you, a doctor by profession, who gives to those in need whatever he can spare; and throughout the whole day he sings the Thrice-Holy Hymn with the angels."⁷⁵⁹

The idea expressed in the above lines that the anonymous doctor is spiritually equal to Antony, the greatest of desert fathers and holy men, gives us much to think about. It indicates that what is needed to glorify God and to enter the Heavenly Kingdom is the opportunity of engaging in active service and of performing charitable deeds on a

⁷⁵⁹ Antony 24, in *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), p. 6.

daily basis. Ware suggests that the way of *hesychia* “lies open to all: the one thing needful is inner silence, not outer.”⁷⁶⁰ We might expound on this comment by suggesting that what is needful to the way of *hesychia* is not only inner silence but commitment to the purification of the heart through the cultivation of neighborly relations and social philanthropy. While Christians living in the world are, no doubt, at a disadvantage in the attempt to enter a state of deep inner stillness (the world cannot but be a distracting place), their constant involvement in worldly affairs, on the other hand, provides them with ever new opportunities of discerning God through interpersonal relationships. For contemporary Christians, active service may well be the foremost means of deepening their religious existence and of drawing closer to God. By committing to love in action, they overcome isolation and alleviate the suffering of fellow-beings. They give rest to God and are propelled into the company of the angels. Individuals who view the welfare and progress of their neighbor with as much joy as their own and who perceive reality with intrinsic mutuality are most authentic in their imitation of Christ.⁷⁶¹

In the third century, Origen wrote that “he prays ‘constantly’ (deeds of virtue or fulfilling the commandments are included as part of prayer) who unites prayer with the deeds required and right deeds with prayer.”⁷⁶² According to Origen, the Christian worships God if “what I do and say is for the glory of God.”⁷⁶³ In the eleventh century, Symeon the New Theologian took a similar view by proposing that the mystical vision of God is granted to all Christians who turn to God with a broken heart and, trusting entirely

⁷⁶⁰ Ware (2000), p. 86.

⁷⁶¹ Mark A. McIntosh, *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), p. 113

⁷⁶² Origen, *PEuch* 12.2, in Greer (1979), p. 104.

⁷⁶³ Origen, *Homilies on the Visions of Isaiah* 4.1, cited in Clément (1982), p. 212.

in penitence, stand in the presence of Divinity.⁷⁶⁴ Like Origen, Symeon did not believe that intimacy with God is reserved for the select few. All Christians, regardless of their station in life, can experience the deifying union with God provided they reorient themselves toward Deity and place their existence in the service of God's glory. If they open themselves to the presence of the divine and all that it entails, including the active pursuit of reconciliation and neighborly love, they are permitted to catch a glimpse of heavenly splendor and peace.

To contemporary Christians, these are reassuring voices. They suggest that today, no less than in ancient Alexandria and medieval Byzantium, Christians living in the world are able, in the words of Paul Evdokimov, to "introduce into society and relationships the truth of the dogmas they live, thus dislodging the evil and profane elements of the world."⁷⁶⁵ Christians have the ability of extending the celebration of the interior liturgy into culture and society. As they reach out to fellow-beings and overcome the tendency intrinsic to our time to fall prey to divisiveness, isolation, and self-interest,⁷⁶⁶ they fulfill their God-given task of mediating between that which has been separated. They work toward greater unity and peace. The more they do so, the purer their hearts become and the brighter the divine light that shines within them. The involvement of today's Christians in charitable deeds has repercussions on a personal, interpersonal, and cosmic level. Body and soul, the individual and the community, the earthly and the heavenly can be reconciled by religious seekers who view prayer as a means of actively engaging with the world.

⁷⁶⁴ McGuckin (2001), pp. 114-115.

⁷⁶⁵ Evdokimov (1998), p. 238.

⁷⁶⁶ The idea of offering the Eucharist in all things, as Paul required, is addressed by Clément (1982), p. 212.

The ability to enter stillness so as to perceive God's interior presence is a vital aspect of inner prayer and, as has been suggested, for Christians who lack the ordered framework of a religious community the opportunity of acquiring the necessary skills to move beyond ordinary perception and to enter a state of altered consciousness in which the presence of Divinity can be discerned is limited. But if this study has taught us anything, it has taught us that greater reliance on the transformative impact of interpersonal relations and on the body as a tool of mystical ascent are no less integral to the tradition of the prayer of the heart and, in their own right, provide valuable avenues toward direct contact with God. According to Olivier Clément, the whole existence of a person can become prayer if it is interpreted in the light of the cross and the resurrection.⁷⁶⁷ Time and again throughout this study, we have had the opportunity to confirm this maxim. The teachings of Aphrahat and Evagrius, to give but two examples, have allowed us to observe that the overzealous pursuit of formal prayer to the detriment of neighborly relations can detract rather than contribute to divine intimacy. The true mystic, according to early Christian theologians, is not the person who engages in the divine quest with the goal of attaining extraordinary, transcendental experiences of God's inner presence. The true mystic is the person who, guided by the divine will and an earnest desire to imitate Christ, relates ever more fully to fellow-beings and to the created order. Genuine mystics strive to extend the liturgy into the world. They seek to overcome imposed barriers and, by doing so, to introduce to mundane existence the peace, justice, and equality of the eschatological community.

⁷⁶⁷ Clément (1982), p. 212.

The doctrine of the prayer of the heart is based on the premise that there is no division between doctrinal and mystical theology and that the teaching of the church guides Christians toward the visceral, experimental encounter with God. Early Christians knew first-hand that intimate, felt contact with Divinity cannot be brought about through intellectual inquiry. For them, the somatic perception of God was the only means of tasting the joys of the heavenly realm and of finding lasting peace.

The idea that the quest for God hinges on the holistic conception of human nature and that it cannot be conducted without paying close attention to the body promises to speak to all contemporary Christians who take for granted the psychosomatic dimension of our condition. Christians who can no longer subscribe to the Cartesian compartmentalization of reality into separate parts are likely to resonate strongly with a teaching which acknowledges the body's innate drive toward oneness with its source of being and which postulates that this drive renders embodied existence vital to personal, interpersonal, and cosmic reintegration. Contemporary religious seekers are likely to resonate with a teaching that knows of the mind's inherent limitations and looks to the body's perceptual faculties to reveal to them the abiding inner presence of Divinity. By embracing a doctrine that views the body as the soul's loyal companion, they stand a chance of knowing God intuitively and of finding their longing for divine intimacy satisfied.

Early Christians were well aware of the fact that embodied existence is never easy. This observation is no less true today than it was in ancient times. Theologians of the ancient church placed this truth at the center of their lives. They knew that the ability to face the challenges of physical existence provided them with constant opportunities to learn the vital lessons of patience, humility, and compassion. They knew that spiritual

advancement calls for the expansion of existing boundaries—an inherently painful process—and that the body is the terrain on which this struggle is played out. For them, the body was the mentor who called the proud soul to task. It was the teacher who presented the soul with ever new challenges. The body was the physician who guided its charge back to spiritual health. Despite the many trials with which the body confronts human beings, early Christian ascetics believed that it never ceases to strive for health, wholeness, and oneness with its Creator. This teaching has lost none of its relevance and is as valuable today as it was in late antiquity.

The prayer of the heart is increasingly being practiced by members of Western churches.⁷⁶⁸ Western Christians who have embraced this ancient practice cherish its emphasis on the inherent unity of human nature and the interrelatedness of all things. They cherish a teaching that views the interior, exterior, and angelic liturgies as reflections of one another and the purification of the individual heart as the beginning of cosmic restoration. Given this frame of reference, contemporary Christians who take to heart this mystical doctrine may know that even while engaged in the world, indeed, precisely because they are engaged in the world and its daily, all too mundane tasks, they are able to transform their inner selves into places of divine indwelling. By heeding the teachings of their early Christian ancestors, they are able to worship God interiorly throughout the day, in any place, and to manifest in the here and now the equality and peace of the eschatological community. Through the glorification of God by means of embodied, relational existence, Western religious seekers can become mystics in the true

⁷⁶⁸ Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Place of the Heart: An Introduction to Orthodox Spirituality* (Torrance, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1992), p. 126.

early Christian sense of the word and convey to the world the Love and Light they have rediscovered in their hearts. Like Evelyn Underhill, the renowned Anglican author of numerous works on Christian mysticism, they may come to realize that the distinction between the mystical life and the practical life is false and that it is through “all the circumstances of existence, inward and outward, not only those we like to label spiritual, that we are pressed to our right position and given our supernatural food. For a spiritual life is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God.”⁷⁶⁹

Here, then, we conclude this study. No doubt, there is a great deal more to explore. Each theologian considered in these pages deserves further, detailed attention on his contributions to the tradition of the prayer of the heart. Such a venture would allow for the ongoing exploration of the incarnational spirit of early Christian mystical thought and for the examination of its pro-body, pro-community orientation. In this study, we have but touched the tip of the iceberg. Still, it is hoped that the emphasis throughout this work on the unifying message of Christianity’s mystical tradition has become apparent. Hopefully it has been shown that early Christian ascetics were individuals who searched for God not by negating physical, relational existence but rather by adopting a holistic stance and by reaching out to their neighbor in a spirit of reconciliation and goodwill.

Given the unifying nature of Christianity’s mystical tradition, the attempt has also been made to show that the division of this tradition into distinct strands, the Greek and the Syrian strand, is but an invention of our own time and does not reflect the dynamic,

⁷⁶⁹ Keith Beasley-Topliffe, ed., *The Soul's Delight: Selected Writings of Evelyn Underhill* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1998), p. 11.

fluid approach of the ancient church and its teaching. Ultimately, the world of late antiquity was too complex to allow for the categorization of its ascetical doctrines into distinct schools of thought. While theologians articulated their teaching either by veering toward the Hellenic or toward the Semitic pole of Christianity's mystical legacy, they never lost sight of its counterpart and knew both aspects of this legacy to be vital to its ongoing appeal and successful transmission.

Last but not least, attention has also been given to the relevance of Christianity's mystical heritage for today's world. With the motif of unity in mind, the attempt has been made to suggest how contemporary religious seekers might benefit from the ascetical teaching of their Christian ancestors, and how it might allow them to reconcile a life of interiority with the responsibilities of every-day existence. This attempt to unify the past and the present has hopefully indicated the lasting value of the doctrine of the prayer of the heart to modern individuals. For Western Christians who lament the lack of spiritual guidance that is being provided by their respective churches and who have turned to other faith traditions in the hope of experiencing greater intimacy with God, the ancient doctrine of inner prayer may reawaken interest in their own tradition. It may show them how they, like their early Christian ancestors, can come to know God in an experiential, heart-felt manner by listening to expressions of divine life in their bodies, their neighbors, and the world at large.

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Precis

Title: Teachings on the Prayer of the Heart in the Greek and Syrian Fathers

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The objective of this dissertation is to consider the embodied, relational nature of early Christian thought by examining the doctrine of the prayer of the heart. The opening discussion explores salient features of this ancient practice, its theological foundation, and biblical heritage. It introduces the two strands of early Christian mystical thought most important to the formation and progressive flowering of the prayer of the heart, the Greek and the Syrian mystical strands. The introductory discussion further proposes the inherent compatibility and complementary nature of these two strands.

The main body of the dissertation seeks to establish the pro-body, pro-community orientation of the prayer of the heart by considering pertinent early Christian primary sources. After an initial exploration of holistic biblical anthropology, attention is given to prominent representatives of the Syrian mystical strand, namely Aphrahat, Ephrem the Syrian, and Macarius. To elucidate the Greek Christian background of the prayer of the heart, ascetical writings by Origen of Alexandria and Evagrius of Pontus are considered thereafter. The development of the prayer of the heart is traced into the sixth and seventh

centuries at the hand of writings by Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor.

Throughout the main body of the dissertation, the deeply experiential, lived nature of the quest for God is emphasized. It is being suggested that early Christians viewed the mystical journey as a venture that involved every facet of human existence and called for the steady deepening of relations with the self—including the body, the local community, and the world at large. The conclusion of the study examines the relevance of the prayer of the heart for contemporary religious seekers.

Biographical Note

Ms. Gather received her education and the initial part of her university training in Germany. Upon moving to the US, she enrolled at Hunter College of the City University of New York, where she received her BA degree in psychology and special honors curriculum in 2000. She completed her MA degree in early Christianity at Union Theological Seminary, New York City, in 2002 and was admitted into the PhD program to pursue further studies in early Christianity the same year. Ms. Gather is particularly interested in the mystical tradition of the ancient church.